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A LONE LASSIE

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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A LONE LASSIE.

CHAPTER I.

THE CASTLE ON THE MOOR.

LIFE's troubles began early for me!

I was only an infant when I was deserted by my natural protectors, and banished from my home. Before I was two years old I was alone in the world —a forlorn little waif, with no one to care whether I lived, and some who would have been glad if I had died. I was worse than an orphan, for I had no parents in heaven to watch over me.

My earliest recollections are connected with an old stone mansion on a sweep of

breezy moorland in Scotland. It was one of those castellated houses which are dignified by the name of castles north of the Tweed. They are clearly French in taste and style, and castle is probably only the English translation of chateau, though certainly most of the words imported into our language by Mary Stuart and her followers are Anglicized merely by pronunciation.

The dwelling-house stood on the north side of a large quadrangle. It was an irregular pile of stonework, only picturesque from its varied outline. The oldest and handsomest portion lay at the north-east corner, the corner itself being formed by a tower, some sixty feet in height. To the tower's side was attached a low two-storied building, four mullioned windows on each story. The house seemed an appendage to the tower, not the tower to the house. A small door, evidently not contemplated in the original design, was

crowded in between the third and fourth window from the tower, on the ground floor. It was approached by a flight of steep steps, and opened into a low room, panelled with black oak, which served as a hall. Part of the building must have been destroyed, or perhaps only a part had been completed ; for the eastern portion of the house was totally different in design and finish, and had a separate entrance. It was evidently a comparatively modern addition, and intended only for the residence of the bailiff, who looked after the live stock in the well-kept farm buildings, which formed the east and west sides of the quadrangle, and cultivated the arable land three miles away to the south. In the centre of the square was a deep well, surrounded by a carved stone wall, from the coping of which rose an arch of beautiful hammered iron-work to carry the pulley for the bucket-rope, just such a well as might be found in the courtyard of an old

Breton chateau. A large stone dovecote, raised on a carved pedestal above the southern wall, was clearly after a French original.

Craigie Castle lay on a stretch of rolling moorlands, nothing breaking the monotony of the undulating horizons, except on one side, where, far away, a blue line of mountains with one dominant peak stood up like a row of jagged teeth against the southern sky. Every wind out of heaven swept the moor, but the wind that blew from the east was the most violent, and often brought “an odour of brine from the ocean,” whose roar we sometimes heard, though it was some four miles distant.

In winter-time the landscape was dreary enough, though there was a wild grandeur in the freedom of the upland swells losing themselves in a chaotic mixture of purple and indigo in the boundless distance, or when they lay covered with the glistening snow tossed in great billows, still and

white as those of an Arctic Ocean. But in summer, when the clouds were chasing each other across the blue sky, the moors were a sea of glory. Waves of pink heather, flecked with foam of amber gorse, seemed absolutely in motion as the lights and shadows flew across the bloom, making the colours run through a gamut from rich purple to brilliant crimson, and pale yellow to the orange glow of gold.

Trees were sparse. A few silver birches were dropped promiscuously here and there, with one large cluster on a gentle eminence north of the castle round a stone seat, which went by the name of Lady Elsie's Bower. To the east a scattered group of stunted oak trees with rugged arms, all stretched out in one direction, seemed to be running away from the blasts of the ocean wind.

Below the farmyard was a kitchen garden, where kale and cabbage grew luxuriantly, and gooseberries and currants

were plentiful enough to strew the ground with melting luxuriousness when man and bird were satisfied. The garden opened into an orchard, where the gnarled branches bore more moss than apples.

The tower and the older part of the building had always been occupied by the family during the shooting season, till my grandfather, Sir Digby Dampier, built a lodge twelve miles away, in a more convenient situation for his best moors. Since that time the castle had degenerated into a mere farmhouse, the rooms in the old part being unoccupied, though not dismantled.

The modern house was inhabited by my father's bailiff, Hamish Macpherson, as honest a man as ever breathed, and entirely devoted to his master's interests. He was a widower, the father of my dear nurse, as also of a son, Kenneth, and another daughter, Effie, both of whom lived with him. The farmhouse was connected with

the castle proper by a door on the upper story. This door had been kept locked until the time of my arrival with my nurse.

Nannie would, for more than one reason, have preferred living amongst her family, but she was more thoughtful of my dignity than her own comfort. Though I was banished from my English home, she was resolved that I should be brought up as mistress of the Scotch castle. I was to take my position at once and for ever, so far as she could ensure it. I was to be lodged in the rooms occupied by my ancestors, though those in the farmhouse would have been more cheery and more fitted for a child's nurseries. Nannie chose two front rooms on the upper story, which looked into the quadrangle, always lively with farmyard sights and sounds. She removed the four-post bedsteads with their funereal hangings, and substituted an iron one for herself, and a cot for me. She

banished a great part of the heavy antique furniture, and put up gay chintz curtains in the place of the dark velvet hangings. She would have liked to have pulled down the Dutch tapestries from the walls, as she said that they only harboured dust. I was very pleased that she was afraid to remove them on her own authority. They were my picture-books, and beguiled many a dull hour. In some panels, lords and ladies were starting for the chase, surrounded by retainers holding in leashes of dogs, or carrying hooded hawks. In others, the stag was flying before the hounds, or keeping them at bay. As I grew older I gave names to the principal figures, and wove their fictitious histories into childish romances. There was a little girl on a white horse in whom I took a special interest, looking upon her as a sort of personification of myself. The lady and gentleman with whom she was riding I assumed to be her parents, and this led

me to ask Nannie why I had no father or mother. She told me that I was the daughter of Sir Lionel and Lady Dampier, but would give no explanation to account for my lonely condition. I began very early to see that she had something to conceal, but at the same time I saw that she had no intention of being more communicative. But I am going ahead too quickly.

In the sunny rooms—sunny, at least, with all the sun that Scotland is treated to—I spent my early childhood, well lodged, well clothed, and well fed. I was petted by all; but Nannie was too wise to allow me to be spoilt. Hamish and Kenneth, however, did their best to spoil me, when her back was turned.

When the weather was fine enough, I lived in the open air. I made friends with all the tenants of the farmyard. Cocks and hens, ducks and geese, even the gobbling turkeys, affected my company, and

were sometimes a little too demonstrative in their affections. The dogs were my favourite playfellows; and one big deer-hound seldom left my side. He would lie near me, blinking with his great brown eyes, ready to snap at any one or anything that he thought likely to injure or annoy me. He was a magnificent beast, was Rannock, and, like most big things, full of heart. Nannie called him my under-nurse, and was never afraid to leave me if he was on guard. I learned to walk holding on to his rough back, and later used to want no better company on my short rambles on the moor. He would stroll by my side, lie at my feet if I sat down to arrange posies of the wild flowers I had gathered, and jump up for a game of romps the moment he saw I was inclined for more active amusement. With such a nurse and such a dog—two such faithful guardians—I was indeed a lucky child. But even they could not make up to me

for the lack of a father's and a mother's love and protection.

We passed our evenings in the kitchen of the farmhouse. As soon as it grew dusk, Nannie always made an excuse to leave the nurseries. When we returned at bedtime, she used to hurry through the passages, and seemed relieved of a sort of fear when she had locked the door behind her. I did not, of course, observe this till I was five or six years old; but then I remember asking her if she was afraid of robbers. "I would rather meet half a dozen robbers than one——" she answered, stopping short in her sentence. What could she have been afraid of? I asked myself. It was long before I found out, but I *did* find out one day!

I thoroughly enjoyed our evenings. We were a happy, though a homely, party. I was the queen. Hamish, his son, and two daughters, and generally a couple of gillies, who helped on the farm during the

non-shooting months, sat round the supper-table, and conversation, if not intellectual, was always animated. It was no wonder that I learned to speak with a strong Scotch accent. After the meal, it was my custom to sit on Hamish's knee, with Rannock at my feet. Man and dog were much alike; both were big and tawny, both were honest and true. I do not know which I loved the best.

Hamish was a splendid man of some sixty years, as straight as a fir, and as strong as an oak. In the Highland kilt which he always wore, he was the beau-ideal of a Scottish clansman. Kenneth was like his father, but not so grandly built—a kindly fellow and a good son. Effie was a pretty, fair-haired lassie, five years younger than her sister, of whom she stood rather in awe, as of one who had seen the world, and was deputy mistress of the castle.

But all this time I have forgotten to

describe my Nannie — perhaps because there is nothing very definite to describe. Jeannie Macpherson was neither tall nor short, neither thin nor stout, neither plain nor pretty ; she just was a lump of love. Love beamed from her eyes, love hung on her tongue, there was love in her touch. It was impossible to look at her without loving her in return. Her eyes were soft and tender blue, her hair was softer still, and her voice was softest of all. To me she was the most beautiful of God's creatures ; and Donald Cameron thought so too. He wanted to carry her off to his Inverness-shire farm, but Nannie would not leave me ; and when pressed to bring me with her to his home, she replied that her young lady could not leave her castle. Great was Donald's loss, great my gain.

Dear Nannie, how I wish now that she had thought less of me and more of herself !

CHAPTER II.

MY FIRST ADVENTURE.

MONTHS crept into years in the happy, peaceful life at Craigie Castle. I thrrove on simple fare—oatmeal porridge, fresh milk and eggs, with a chicken now and then, or a grouse in its season. Butchers' meat I rarely tasted; and if strong limbs and red cheeks are a sign of health, I required none.

They were uneventful years, leaving little to remember beyond the affectionate care of all with whom I lived. I had never been more than two miles from the castle, never further than the kirk, where we worshipped on the sabbath.

My education was not entirely neglected. Nannie taught me to read and write, and Kenneth, who was quite a scholar, gave me lessons in arithmetic and geography. I had a wonderful love for music, and the faculty of catching a tune once heard. My voice was powerful for so young a child, and I was constantly using it. I sang all day to myself, and most evenings was called upon by Hamish to sing him some favourite Scotch ballad—I knew a good many by heart, and was always on the look-out for more. “She gets her music from her mother,” I heard Nannie say one day. This set me questioning her, but I could get no satisfaction to my curiosity beyond the answer that no one in the world could sing like Lady Dampier. My love of music grew stronger when I knew that it was shared by my unknown parent, and in pouring out my heart in song, I fancied that I was communing with her. I could sit for hours in Lady

Elsie's Bower, sending my voice across the moor in floods of self-taught melody; but no answering strain came from my southern home.

As my mind opened, I became more anxious to know what lay beyond the purple heather. I longed to visit Edinburgh and Glasgow, of which Kenneth gave me such glowing descriptions, and still more London, which he showed me on the map, and told me was the richest and grandest city in the universe.

I had almost as much curiosity to look at the sea, which was really within reach. Both Hamish and his son had promised to take me some day to the coast; but some day is no day, and the more I was put off the more ardently did I desire to visit it. I tried to form an idea of the ocean, and often asked questions to help me to create one in my brain.

“I want to know what the sea is like, Hamie,” I asked one wild October evening,

when the wind was roaring round the house, and Nannie said she could hear the noise of the waves.

“It’s a naething but waater, lassie,” was his sapient reply.

“I ken that weel. So is our douk-pond,” I answered pertly.

“It’s saalt waater. That’s jist the differ o’ it.”

“Where does the saalt come frae?” I asked.

Hamish stroked his beard and looked puzzled. “I niver thocht o’ that, lassie. I’m thinking there maun be mines o’ saalt niest the waater.”

“What a muckle deal it would tak’! Kenneth says there is mair waater than land on the globe.”

“A muckle deal, lassie.”

“Are the fish in the sea saalt, Hamish?”

“Jist kippered,” cried Kenneth, laughing.

“Gin awa’, Kenneth; you’re making

sport o' me. Kippers are dried i' the sun, and saaltded with saalt; ain't they, Nannie?"

"Ay, dearie! Kenneth is flyting ye. The beasties in the sea are no saalter than the troot i' the burn."

"Is the sea deep, Hamish—deep as the house?"

"Muckle deeper, lassie."

"Deep as the tower?"

"As fifty o' them; and in some parts it has nae bottom."

"I'm greedy to hae a sicht o' it, Hamish. You might tak' me wi' ye on the sheltie."

"I'll tak' ye some day; but I'm terrible busy the noo."

"Kenneth might tak' me, then?"

"Na, na; he's owerta'en with his ain wark. The cald weather is coomin' on."

"You're aye saying it'll do the morn, when I am seeking to gang ony way. If you canna tak' me, ye can say something mair about the wonderful waater. Ay, but it maun be fine."

“ ‘Tis a terrible fine sicht, lassie. When the sun shines, it glints as gin it war a’ ower wi’ stars, jist like the lift turned upside-down; and fan the wind blaws as it does the day, it’s something fearsome. It’s a’ tossed wi’ muckle waves as big as the hills, covered ower with white foam instead o’ heather. They roar like a thousand bulls as they dash upo’ the shore, gin as tho’ they wanted to swallow the airth.”

“ Eh, Hamish, but I’m feared! I’m richt glad the sea is sae far awa’. Are ye sure it canna meddle wi’ us here?”

“ Ye need na be fecht, lassie. The Almighty has pitten it within boonds, which it canna pass.”

“ I am glad o’ that. I should na like to be drooned, like the puir folk i’ the flood. Are there ony arks upo’ the sea noo?”

“ Unco’ like it. Great muckle ships; some’s big as the hoose, wi’ mony stories, that can carry a thoosand men. There be

wee boats, too, like cockle-shells, dancin' on the waves."

"It maun be frightsome t' sail in such wee things."

"Ay, it is, missie. A fisher's life is fu' o' danger, and there's mony lone weedies an' faitherless bairns a' roun' the coast."

"What for do they fish, when there's sae muckle danger?"

"Fisher folk maun live," was Hamish's paradoxical reply.

Hamish's description of the wonderful ocean so filled my little brain—I was just seven years old—that I dreamed all night of something very weird and grand and terrible—something very unlike the reality; for who could imagine anything so majestic and so beautiful? I woke next morning before daybreak, haunted by my dream. I could not sleep again. As I lay awake in my cot, the desire to see the ocean grew into a resolution that I would see it, and before the day was over. It was not five-

miles off. I was a strong lassie for seven years old, and I felt I could walk the distance, if I took my time over it. I would have a long rest when I got there, and return in the afternoon. I rose in more than my usual spirits. I dressed myself almost without Nannie's aid. I hurried over breakfast, eating so little and so silently that she thought I must be ill. My heart was beating so wildly with excitement that I could hardly answer when she asked if anything ailed me.

“I'll be a' richt,” I answered, with flushing cheek, “when I get into the air. I am sae hot.”

“Hot!” cried Nannie; “you maun be in a fever, bairn! It is a raw autumn day.”

“Na, na, Nannie! I am richt eneuch. I did na sleep well, that's a'.”

“Did the music waken ye?”

“Na. I dinna think I heard it; did you?”

“I thocht sae, but maybe I was dreaming.”

“I wonder who plays o’ the spinet, Nannie.”

“Naebody, bairn.”

“It canna play o’ itself, can it?”

“It maun be the wind on the wires, or maybe the mice rinning ower the notes.”

“Mice canna play tunes, nor yet the wind, Nannie;” and I began to hum a mournful air that I had often heard at night.

“Dinna, dearie, dinna sing that song; it’s sae sorrow-sad. I canna bear to hear it. Never mind about the music. Jist rin out, and gin ye dinna come to dinner bright, bonny, and hungry, I’ll be to gi’e ye some stuffie not quite to your taste. There, rin awa’! The douks and the geese are callin’ at ye.” And she gave me a hearty kiss.

I was not long in putting on my hat and a warm tippet. I ran out and called

Rannock loudly, but for once his joyous bark did not respond. I called again more loudly, and knew that he was not in the yard, or his paws would have been on my shoulders before the echo of my voice had died away. A gillie coming out of the barn told me, to my bitter disappointment, that the dog had gone off early with Hamish to a village five miles away. It was most provoking, just as I specially needed the deerhound's company and protection. At first I was for postponing my expedition till he could escort me, but on second thoughts I knew I should be so miserable if I did not carry out my plan, that I resolved, as Rannock was not to the fore, to go alone.

I put a hunch of bread, kept back from breakfast, into a little basket, and added some eggs from the hen-house. I filled a bottle with cream in the dairy, and then ran through the kitchen garden into the orchard, where I picked up a few

windfalls. I started boldly on my long walk.

The storm of yesterday had made the heather wet and the grass sloppy, but I was too excited to feel or care that my boots were soaking. I trudged along, never looking back, lest I should see Nannie waving a recall, which I should have been too obedient to disregard. I kept on steadily, with my eyes fixed on the eastern horizon. I seemed to make little progress; but after an hour's tramp I ventured to look back, when the dwarfed size of the tower told me that I had come a good way on my journey. It grew smaller and smaller as I turned my head from time to time.

I began to feel weary, and with fatigue came repentance. The tears welled into my eyes, as I thought how badly I had behaved to my kind Nannie, who would be looking for me in bitter anxiety, when she found me absent from the midday meal.

Conscience pricked me sharply, and fear whispered that I might never see my home again. I thought of turning back, but a sip of cream and a crust restored my courage and checked my repentance.

I could not be far from the sea, for I heard its noise louder every step. Hamish had said that it sounded like the bellowing of bulls; it was more like the roar of thunder, clap after clap. I was terribly frightened, and would have given all the world to have been safe on Nannie's lap. It was awful to be alone, with the wild ocean thundering at my feet; but curiosity mastered fear. I must take one peep, and then I would go home. In a few minutes I should know what the ocean was really like. My heart beat as if it wanted to batter my ribs. Oscillating between intense fear and a mysterious delight at being so near the object of my quest, I ran forward, and after more than one tumble, which resulted in the breaking of three out

of my four eggs, I came to a dead stop on the brink of a precipice.

The ocean lay before me. I threw myself on the turf, and gazed my fill. I was breathless with admiration and amazement. Never in my dreams had I pictured such a glorious sight. The sea was heaving, rolling, tumbling. The waves were crowned with white foam, and, as they dashed upon the rocks, tossed the spume into the air to fall in showers of spray. I could see, north and south, promontory after promontory, one behind the other, fading away in the distant haze. All was life, movement, strife—a hell of angry waters. Now and then a gleam of sunshine, shooting through a rift in the scudding clouds, made the waves glow like melted emeralds and painted rainbows on the leaping spray. Oh! it was a glorious sight of Godlike grandeur! Child as I was, I felt that I shrank into nothingness before the majesty of the battling waves!

What was I? A speck of dust in the presence of the profound immensity of the trackless ocean!

I forgot my fatigue, my hunger, nurse's anger. I only gaped and gazed at the tumbling monster at my feet, and longed for a nearer view. Craning over the precipice, I spied a little path in a ravine between the rocks. I traced it to the summit of the cliff. I jumped up, and in a delirium of excitement made my way to its starting-point, ran down the steep incline, and in a few minutes was standing a few feet above the yellow sand. The spray was tossed in my face, though the waves broke a hundred yards away. I was not yet near enough. I found some rough steps cut in the rock. They were slippery, but I clambered down cautiously, and reached the shore without a stumble. I danced with delight. The sand felt so comforting to my feet after plodding through the heather. I took off my wet

boots and stockings, and ran about bare-footed, shouting with excitement, whilst the sea-mews screamed above.

The shore was strewn with beautiful shells tossed up by the tempest, and with delicate seaweeds torn from deep ocean gardens. I stooped to gather them with all a child's rapture at finding a new play-thing. I filled my handkerchief with shells of every shape and hue, and seaweeds, red and brown and golden, only to throw away my unknown treasures to pick up others, the latest found seeming always the most beautiful.

At last, when the first novelty had worn off, I recollect that it must be past my dinner-hour. I sat down on a rock, swallowed my last egg, and munched my bread and apples. No dainties ever equalled that anchorite meal eaten to the battle-music of the waves.

A sudden shower sent me running for shelter to the cliff. A cave opportunely

opened a large doorway to receive me. It ran up some way into the bowels of the earth. At the extremity was a bank of soft dry sand. As long as the first excitement was upon me, I forgot everything but the grand and strange scene before me. Now I felt tired—oh, so tired! My feet were sore and my limbs ached. My eyelids tingled with the salt spray. I closed and rubbed them, and found it difficult to open them again, so heavy were they with coming sleep. I sank gently down on the natural bed, which seemed prepared expressly for me, and in a minute I was wrapped in the soundest slumber. I dreamed that I was at home again, safe in Nannie's arms, and that Rannock—dear old dog!—was licking my hand to welcome me. I awoke. My hand was wet. It was no dream then, but a waking reality. I sat up, and found to my horror that the water was creeping all around me. My sandy bed was nearly covered. I could hear the

waves dashing on the rocks at the mouth of the cave, and could see flecks of foam sailing up the dark gulf flowing at my feet. I jumped up. The entrance was deep with water. I wondered what it all meant. I knew nothing about the tides, had never heard of ebb and flow. I stood bewildered, like one in a hideous nightmare. The water was rising round my naked legs. I retired before it to the utmost limit of the cave. The cruel water followed me. Escape seemed impossible. It rose creepingly to my knees; but still I do not think that I realized that Death was waiting to clutch me in his cold arms. In my terror I called for Nannie, Hamish, Kenneth, Rannock; but the echo was the only answer to my cries. I leaned against the hard rock; my head knocked against a projecting ledge, and, with the strength born of despair, I drew myself up and scrambled on to it. I fell upon my knees, and, whispering "Our Father," swooned away. A foot

or two more of water, and I should no longer have been a burden to any one. God forgive me, but I have often since wished that the tide had overwhelmed me as I lay unconscious in that seaside cave.

When I came back to life, I was in darkness. I listened, but heard no water lapping below me. I stretched down my hand. It remained dry. I crept gently down, and found that the sand was damp but hard. I could see a pale light shimmering at the entrance to the cave. I groped my way with my hands, and soon stood outside under a clear sky, spangled with myriads of winking stars. The storm was over. I was saved! The sea was still breaking in great billows on the shore, but there was no longer the deafening din or the blinding spray, only the thuds of the waves as they fell in quick succession on the hard ribbed sand.

I was saved from drowning only to die of starvation, I began to fear. I could not

find the bottle of cream, which I now remembered I had left on the sand, when I ran for shelter from the rain. I was too weak and faint from hunger to think of attempting to walk home. My legs would not carry me. I seemed to grow old in that dreadful moment. I had not time to think in the cave, now I had nothing to do but to think. I remembered all my little acts of rebellion and unkindness, my sins of omission and commission ; but the great sin of stealing away from home rose up before me like an unpardonable crime, only to be expiated by death. I should never see my darling Nannie again, never sit on kind Hamish's knee, never learn any more lessons with Kenneth, never play with Effie. I should never hear Rannock's bark or feel his cold nose against my cheek, when he jumped up to greet me of a morning. I sank, sobbing out my heart, on the moist sand, and whispered a prayer to heaven for forgiveness,

and a last farewell to the dear ones at home.

I thought of my father and mother, and wondered why they had deserted their child. I should have been more resigned to die if I had once seen their faces—even only once. I felt, or thought that I felt, the icy hand of death creeping towards my heart.

Hark! What was that? The bark of a dog! I should know that bark amongst a thousand. It was Rannock's bark, my Rannock's! I staggered to my feet. I had no voice to cry out, not that I should have been heard if I had shouted. My voice would not have carried so far; the bark seemed to come from the sky. At last I saw men's figures and the shape of a dog on the cliff above, dark against the clear, starlit sky. They were standing still. Now they walked off away from me. I tried to run in the same direction, but came to the ground from weakness. In

an agony of despair, I waved my handkerchief. It fluttered in the wind. They stopped, and came back in my direction. The wind almost carried my handkerchief away. I held it with the little strength that remained to me, and closed my eyes. I heard a shout and such a joyous bark.

Thanks be to God, I was seen; I was saved! Down the cliff came Rannock, barking all the while as if he was wild with joy. In a few minutes I heard feet pattering on the sand, and soon the dear dog's eyes were looking into mine as he licked my face, licked away the tears that had come at last to relieve my overstrained nerves. Hamish, Kenneth, and the gillies were not far behind him. Rannock left me to welcome them, and lead them to his weary playfellow. Hamish lifted me in his arms and kissed me. I gave one look of gratitude and repentance into his honest eyes, and then closed mine in a faint of happiness and fatigue.

They poured whiskey down my throat, and rubbed my feet and hands with the same spirit. I felt returning life and warmth, and, opening my eyes, met the anxious eyes of Hamish wet with happy tears.

“ Will you forgive me, Hamie ? ” I whispered. “ Will Nannie ever forgive me ? I have been awfu’ naughty ; but I was wantin’ sair to speer at the big sea, and ye would na tak’ me.”

“ Yes, lassie ; I ken it was a’ my fault,” he replied with a husky voice.

“ Na, na, Hamie ; it was na you, it’s me that was bad. But I have been punished eneuch. Will Nannie punish me again, think you ? ”

“ She will be ower happy to win ye back safe, puir wee lassie ; she’ll na be angert at ye. There, missie, just ye shut your peepers and try to sleep.”

I think the whiskey must have made me tipsy ; for I did not wake once the whole

way home, not till the sun was high next day. When I did wake, I was in my cosy cot, and Nannie was leaning over me.

“ My bairn, my ain wee bairn ! ” she cried, as she clasped me to her loving heart. I knew that I was forgiven before I asked for forgiveness.

“ I will never rin awa’ again, Nannie. I have seen the mighty ocean—eh, it was grand !—but I dinna care to see it ony mair. It nearly drownded me ; ” and I shuddered at the recollection. I told her all the particulars of my adventure, and how near to death I had been.

“ Was I sae near losing my bairn ? ” sobbed Nannie, holding me still more tightly to her breast.

She made me keep my bed all day. I slept as I had never slept before—through sunshine, gloaming, and dark night—and woke next morning restored to health ; but for many days I felt inclined to faint when

I thought of the creeping crawling water in the ocean cave.

This was my first adventure, so I have told it in detail. It was not my last!

CHAPTER III.

THE SHOOTING LODGE.

A JOURNEY from home is always an event in a child's life, especially the first journey. With the exception of my disastrous expedition to the sea, I had never been further from the castle than the kirk.

I had often cravings to see beyond the heather which surrounded me, but had almost given up the hope of ever doing so. It was with unfeigned delight that I heard the doctor say that change of air was absolutely necessary to bring back my strength, after a sharp attack of measles, followed by whooping-cough.

Where I was to go was a question which

puzzled Nannie, till her father suggested the shooting lodge at Glen Shiel. It was empty, and not likely to be required by my father this season more than any of the past seasons. He had never been to his Scotch moors since I came to Craigie. He had seldom been in England, and the letters received by Hamish Macpherson were few and far between, and generally from outlandish foreign places, where the pursuit of wild game seemed the object of his wandering life.

The 12th of August was close at hand, and, as no orders had been received to prepare the lodge, Hamish thought we might safely migrate to Glen Shiel at once. The doctor was of opinion that the higher altitude of at least eight hundred feet was more than sufficient compensation for the shortness of the distance—a matter only of twelve miles.

Half the pleasure of a journey is in anticipation and preparation, and for two

or three days previous to our departure I made Nannie's life a burden. I emptied the drawers and stuffed my clothes into impossible bags and boxes, and caused Effie much extra trouble in reironing and repacking.

It was a beautiful morning in early August when we started for Glen Shiel. Nannie and I each rode a pony—shelties, we call them in Scotland. Our small amount of luggage followed in a light cart. Hamish walked by my side, Kenneth attended to the cart. The path lay over a long stretch of moor, now blushing with heather. As we journeyed southwards, the tower grew smaller behind us, and the mountains in front seemed to lift themselves up to look at us. Half-way we descended into a green valley watered by a clear stream, which we crossed, and then followed in the direction of its source. As the valley narrowed, the stream became a brawling burn, pelting its way through

granite boulders, which it had itself brought down from the heights above, when winter storms converted the stream into a torrent. Now it looked like a silver thread upon the mountain-side—a Dædalian clue to guide us into the labyrinth of the hills.

We soon began to mount a steep ascent, crossing and recrossing the stream as the lay of the ground required the path to run on its right or left bank. About noontide a deep tarn spread a mirror for the sky. A small cascade tumbled from a rock above it into a natural basin, and then ran through the flower-spangled sward into the little lake. It was just the place for our picnic dinner. My obedient vassals unpacked the hamper, and spread a cloth upon the grass. I already felt the influence of the higher altitude. Appetite, which I had lost during my illness, was beginning to come back. I sat a little queen on a lichen-painted rock for throne.

Youth and the joy of returning health were mine. There was sunshine on the heather, there was sunshine in my heart. I did not know what sorrow was; but I was soon to learn!

On our upward way we passed several smaller tarns, the last of which was the cradle of our mountain-stream. A quarter of an hour beyond we reached the summit of the pass, and my eyes were dazed with the glorious view they looked upon. Below was a smiling valley, through which ran an abounding river, and on the farther side rose a chain of mountains, one peak overtopping all the others, which from its peculiar shape I thought I recognized as the one we saw in the distance from Craigie.

“Is na that the Giant’s Tooth?” I cried; for so I had christened the highest peak.

“Ay, is it, missie!” answered Hamish. “Thon’s the big tooth.”

“What a long road we’ve traivelled!” I exclaimed.

“Na more than ten miles—a muckle way for a wee lassie like you. Ye’ll be tired?”

“Na a bit, Hamie. I’m that fresh, I wish we had a hunner miles mair to go.”

“I’m unco’ glad that we are soon coming to the lodge,” said Nannie, emphatically. “I’m stiff from ridin’ sae lang on the sheltie.”

“A first journey’s aye short,” remarked Hamish; “at least, fan ye’re young. Ye can get off the sheltie, Jeannie, and walk a wee. It’s na twa miles to the hoose and a’ down hill. There it is! Ye’ll see the reek abune the trees anent the river.”

Nannie dismounted, and I gladly followed her example; for I saw many unknown flowers peeping out of the fine grass. I had soon gathered a large posey, and had eaten my fill of wild strawberries. I already felt the influence of the strong bracing air.

“Siccan an ugly house!” I exclaimed, as we approached the lodge. “It’s no near sae bonny as the castle.”

“I’d raether bide i’ the lodge for a’ that,” said Nannie, emphatically.

“Why for?” I asked.

“For mair reasons than one, dearie,” she answered mysteriously.

There was certainly nothing picturesque about the building itself, but the situation was supremely beautiful, an oasis of verdure in the heart of the solemn hills. The lodge was long and low, only one-storied, and without any architectural pretension. Behind were extensive stables and farm buildings.

“Noo, I ca’ it reel fine,” said Hamish. “It’s simple and substantial. There’s naething to tak’ the ‘ee frae off the glorious mountains. Turrets and towers and heedious monsters for waterspouts may be a’ weel eneuch gin there’s naught else to speer at, but for my part I’s no carin’ to

hae my thochts ta'en off the gran' warks o' the Lord to the puir warks o' His creatures. Bide a wee, lassie, till ye see the inside o' the lodge. Ye'll no say it's ugly ony way then."

Hamish was right. The interior was a great contrast to the exterior. Everything was done to please the eye and to give a comfortable and homelike look to the small but handsomely furnished rooms. The feet sank in deep-piled carpets, which glowed with rich warm colours, as did all the fabrics of the furniture and curtains. The entrance-hall was hung with antlers of stags killed on the neighbouring moors, and rare paintings, chiefly sporting subjects, decorated the walls of the sitting-rooms. I ran about the house, rapt in admiration of all I saw. There was not only a change in the air I breathed, which was more bright and exhilarating than at Craigie, but there was an indescribable difference in the moral atmosphere. Nurse

did not hurry about at night, as if she was afraid of her own footsteps; and I heard none of the strange sounds that puzzled me at the castle—no midnight music, no fall of invisible feet, of which I may speak hereafter.

Novelty is ever pleasing, to a child especially. I was wild with delight at everything I saw. The river winding through the alders, the everlasting hills changing in beauty as the shadows flew or crept across their purple slopes. I loved to watch the sun rising behind the mountains we had crossed, and setting in golden glory behind the jagged summits to the south-west. I was in the air from morning to night, daily taking more exercise as my strength increased. Sometimes I walked with Hamish or Kenneth, but oftenest wandered alone, picking wild flowers and mountain strawberries, or following the river through the valley to watch the timid trout darting through the clear water.

Nannie complained that the mountain air was too strong for her, and took away her walking powers; so she seldom gave me her company on my distant rambles, but kept her eye on me, she said, from a sunny seat behind the lodge, which commanded an extensive view.

In many places on the mountain-sides grey granite boulders cropped up out of the turf. There was one much larger than the others, half an hour's walk to the east of the lodge. I was tomboy enough to enjoy a climb, and was very proud, after many falls and much clothes-tearing, of having found a way to the top of this conspicuous rock. It became a favourite resort of mine. I called it my castle, and from the ramparts of my natural keep I spent many an hour, sweeping valley and mountain with my eyes in the hope of seeing a large herd of wild deer. I often had seen a stag or two with their does, but never the large herds that Hamish led me

to expect. I seemed to wait and watch in vain.

The 4th of September was my birthday, and I had come into possession of a large doll, which Nannie had ordered from Aberdeen. Wishing to be alone with my new plaything, I retired with all the delight of spurious maternity to my castle. After undressing and dressing my wax infant a dozen times, I laid her down on the scented thyme, and sat watching the cloud shadows. My eyes unconsciously followed one up the steep climb above my solitary seat, till it reached the mountain-top, or rather a saddle between two peaks. I saw something which appeared to move. It was not long before I made up my mind that it was the antlers of a great stag. The head and shoulders followed the antlers, and soon the whole body stood out clear against the blue sky. The stag was soon joined by half a dozen others. They appeared to be holding a council. They looked in every

direction, and then with a sudden start bounded forwards, followed by a number of hinds. Here was the sight I was longing for. I watched them with my heart in my mouth, as they came straight down the mountain-side towards my castle. They stood still some three hundred yards off. The stags threw up their heads and sniffed the air, whilst the hinds clustered round them, as if for protection.

I soon discovered the cause of their alarm. I saw men creeping down behind a sort of rocky buttress or spar of the mountain. They crept quietly and stealthily till they were within two hundred yards of the herd. There were five men, whom I supposed to be poachers. The first man lifted up his head above the natural wall, rested his rifle on the rock, and fired deliberately two barrels. There was a wild stampede—a headlong rush past my vantage-ground; but two of the stags lagged behind, both evidently wounded.

One tossed his head frequently, and as he approached I could see the blood streaming from a wound in his neck. He staggered once and recovered himself, then fell to the ground, and with a supreme effort bounded up again, only to totter a few paces, when he rolled over dead at my feet. I saw the other stag drop a couple of hundred yards farther down. Both shots were fatal. The rest of the herd made for the river, swam it, and disappeared.

It made my heart bleed to see the grand beast, a moment ago so proud of its beauty and speed, lying below me with tongue out and glazing eye, motionless in death. I felt for the poor stag, and instinctively clambered down the steep side of my castle. In my haste my foot slipped, my ankle turned, and, almost fainting with pain, I rolled down the rock, and fell absolutely against the dead stag. I could not move, though I would have given worlds to have risen and run away, for I felt the warm

blood soaking through my dress, and the sight of death was a new and painful sensation. I closed my eyes, and did not open them till I felt a hand upon my forehead.

A gentleman in Highland costume was leaning over me, and looking at me with kind and pitying eyes.

“What a lovely child!” he exclaimed. “Why are you crying, little one? Are you hurt, or only frightened?”

I pointed to my foot, which he took up tenderly, and, having taken off my boot and stocking, carefully examined. Whilst he was thus occupied I had time to observe the gentleman’s handsome face, which was half covered with a thick brown beard. When I looked into his dark blue eyes, I felt drawn to him in a mysterious manner. They seemed familiar to me, as well as his soft, pleasant voice.

“The child has sprained her ankle,” he said to a younger gentleman, who was

now kneeling by his side ; “badly, too. She must have had a nasty tumble ;” and he looked up at the steep walls of my castle.

“ Ay,” I whispered ; “ I fell doun frae there.”

“ From the top ? ” he asked anxiously.

“ Na, na ; only a wee bit doun.”

“ Do you think you could walk at all ? ”

“ Not a step ! ” I shrieked, as I tried to put my foot to the ground. “ It hurts dreadfu’.”

“ Poor child ! ” said brown-beard, sympathetically. “ Then I must carry you.”

“ The naisty blood will mess your coat,” I exclaimed, as I looked with a shudder at the ghastly stain upon my frock.

“ We deer-stalkers are accustomed to a little of that. It will wash off. Come, little maid, let me lift you gently.”

He raised me in his arms so tenderly, so carefully ; I felt strangely happy there—so at home as I nestled against his heart.

“ Are you comfortable ? ” he asked.

“Ay, sae comfy. My foot does na hurt
noo that ye’re holding it up.” And I
closed my eyes with a feeling of utter
content.

“She has fallen asleep, poor little brat,”
he said to his companion. “Isn’t she
beautiful? You ought to paint her, Glan-
mire. I never saw such dark violet eyes
but once.”

“To whom did they belong?”

“To a woman I have good reason for
hating.”

“I did not know that you hated any.
You are partial to a good many.”

“You forget my wife—curse her!”
And I felt a shudder run through his
frame.

“I beg your pardon, Dampier. I am
sorry that I have recalled unpleasant
memories.”

“I have no one to blame but myself—
and these violet eyes.”

“I wonder who this little Venus can

be?" said the younger man. "She does not look like a peasant's child. There is a rare amount of breeding in these small hands and feet."

Young as I was, I could not help smiling to hear my childish charms discussed in this open way.

"The little one is foxing!" cried brown-beard. "She is only shamming to be asleep. Who would have thought to meet with such duplicity amongst the mountains?"

"I was not foxing!" I exclaimed, laughing outright. "I closed my eyes because I felt sae cosy and comfortable. Your arms are jist like a cradle."

"You are a coaxing little humbug," said my bearer. "Come, tell us where you live. Are you a fairy? and where is your invisible palace?"

"I am only a wee lassie. I wish I was a pixy."

"Why, my child?"

“I should have some little pixies to play with.”

“You have no brothers and sisters—no companions?”

“Not one. I dinna live here; I am only biding at the lodge because I have had the measles.” And I looked into the blue eyes, which had such a mysterious power to inspire confidence and love.

“The lodge yonder—Glen Shiel?”

“Yes. Nannie brought me there for change of air.”

“Pray, who is Nannie, and what right had she to bring you to my house?—not that you are not very welcome.”

“The lodge belongs to you!” I cried, in great excitement. “Then you maun be Sir Lionel Dampier?”

“I certainly am the owner of Glen Shiel, and my name is Lionel Dampier.”

“I have found you at last!” And, lifting myself, I threw my arms round his neck. I had found my dear father,

and I clutched him as if I would never let go my hold.

“What is the meaning of this sudden affection?” cried my father, laughing, and at the same time looking very puzzled.

“You are my faither, my ain dear faither. Kiss me; kiss your wee daughter Nellie.”

No kiss was pressed upon my cheek; no loving words replied to mine. My father tore my arms from round his neck, and shook me off as if I had been a venomous snake, a loathsome reptile.

I should have fallen to the ground had not his friend caught me in his arms. I shall never forget the look of concentrated hate and disgust which disfigured my father’s face, before so bright and kindly, as he turned away with something very like a curse upon his lips.

“What is the matter, Dampier?” asked the gentleman in whose arms I now lay, trembling with terror and weeping with

disappointment. “What has the poor child done that you should treat her so cruelly? She only asked you to kiss her.”

“Kiss that creature!” he almost shrieked. “Take the little devil away, or, by God, I shall kill her!”

“Dinna let him kill me!” I cried. “Oh, what hae I done to anger him sae? I did na mean to offend him; I only wanted to love my faither.”

“Sir Lionel is your father!” exclaimed my father’s friend. “Poor child, poor child!” and he looked so pitifully at me.

“Yes; I am Nellie Dampier. Winna ye tell me why papa hates me so?”

He did not answer me, but gave me a kiss, and placed me gently on the turf. He ran after my father, who was striding down the hillside gesticulating like a madman. I saw him take my father’s arm, as if trying to calm him; but my father shook it off, and strode on, covering his face with his hands.

“Papa is crying,” I said to myself. “What can I have done to make him so sad?” and the tears ran down my own cheeks, and watered the wild thyme by my side.

Through the mist in my eyes I saw Hamish come out of the lodge to meet my father, who addressed him passionately. I thought he was going to strike him, and I think he would have done so had not my brave hound bounded between them. Nannie ran out and spoke to my father. I fancied her words did good, for he seemed to become calmer. His friend, who had now joined him, led him into the house. Hamish and Nannie followed.

I tried to crawl towards the lodge, but my ankle pained me too much. I was obliged to give it up. I buried my face in the scented thyme and cried piteously. I began to puzzle my brain for a cause for the intense aversion manifested by my father; for that I, Eleanor Dampier, was

the daughter of Sir Lionel Dampier was beyond a doubt. It was a mystery to me how a father could hate his child, but it was a fact that my father hated me.

When I raised my eyes again, I saw Kenneth saddling the ponies, and nurse was placing pillows and rugs in the cart. What could they be doing? Curiosity dried my tears. Nannie went back into the house, and returned with her bonnet and shawl on. Kenneth brought out the luggage, strapped some on one pony and put the rest into the cart. They both looked in my direction, and then started up the hill to come to me.

“Come awa’, dearie!” cried nurse, as she approached. “We are gain’ hame.”

“To the castle?” I asked.

“Ay, my bonny bairn. We maun mak’ haste, if we are to win there before dark. I’m hearin’ my lassie has hurt her footie, sae Kenneth has come to carry you doun to the cairt.”

“I dinna want to gang hame; I dinna want to leave Glen Shiel. Is papa going to stay?”

“Ay, missie. Sir Lionel wrote faither twa or three days ago, biddin’ him get the lodge ready, as he was biding wi’ Lord Glanmire on the ither side o’ the mountain, and micht come ower ony day.”

“Hamish did not get the letter?” I suggested.

“Na; it maun be lying noo at Craigie. Sir Lionel is sair angert.”

“That is na my fault. It would na make papa angry with me. He threw me out o’ his arms the moment he knew I was his bairn. Ye dinna ken, Nannie, how he looked at me.”

“Hoots, dearie! never ye mind. There maun be a muckle mistake somegates. Dinna greet ony mair. Ye have plenty folks to love ye—your Nannie, and faither, and Kenneth.”

“And Rannock,” I added, as he came

bounding up the hill to meet me; for I was now being carried in Kenneth's arms, whilst Nannie walked by my side, holding my hand.

“Ay, darling! everybody and every-thing loves ye.”

“Except papa. Fathers do not often hate their bairnies?”

“Oh, fie! No!”

“My faither maun be real wicked not to love his wee lassie; but I canna help loving him all the same. Does mamma hate me too?”

“I am certain sure she does na.”

“I ken papa hates her as much as he hates me.”

“How do you ken that, dearie?”

“He said he hated her, and he cursed her too. Why is it, Nannie? Why does mamma not live with papa? Where is she?”

“What a muckle lot o' questions ye're asking! Here we are at the cairt. See,

what a nice bed I hae made for you. Be dooce wi' her, Kenneth ! Is the puir footie better ? ”

“ I dinna greet about the pain, but I do greet about papa’s hating me. Canna I see him for a moment before I go awa’, just to say good-bye and ask him to forgive me ? ”

“ Ye have naething to be forgiven. Dinna fash yoursel’ about Sir Lionel ; he’s some cross to-day.—Gang on, Kenneth ; we must get along fast. It will never do to be out o’ nicht.”

What a difference between our arrival and departure ! I had danced down the mountain-side ; I was now ascending, unable to walk, jostled in a cart, with a heart heavy with sorrow, and eyes red with weeping. I could see no speedwell in the sky, no emeralds in the sward. The mountains were misshapen masses of earth ; the river was only cold, shivering water ; the landscape had no beauty.

Even Rannock's bark had lost its music, as he ran by my side and tried to attract my attention, by leaping up to look at me in my shaky bed.

I had discovered that life was not all sunshine, that little hearts can ache, and that childish tears can burn and blister.

I looked round now and then to catch diminishing views of the lodge where I had passed such happy days. I knew that it sheltered my father, the father I had so longed to see; and when it was hidden from my sight, I felt that I was more than ever an orphan. It is better, indeed, to be fatherless than to have a father who hates his child.

The journey home was made much more quickly than the journey out, the road being nearly all downhill; but we did not reach the castle till the sun had set behind the purple hills we had left behind.

I felt that I had grown years older in that one short summer day!

CHAPTER IV.

THE SNOW LADY.

I HAVE hinted that Nannie had reasons, which would have led her to prefer rooms in the farmhouse to rooms in the castle, had she not sacrificed her personal feelings to my dignity. There was something more than sociability and family affection which sent her every evening to the general sitting-room in the bailiff's house.

Nannie carefully concealed from me the uncanny reputation of the old building. I had to find out the truth myself. There were things that I could not understand, and hardly tried to account for; but a year after my sad journey to Glen Shiel, I had

good reason to comprehend the eeriness of my home. I saw enough with my own eyes to explain not only my nurse's reluctance to spend her evenings in the nurseries, but also my grandfather's desertion of the castle.

The best rooms were, as I have already mentioned, in the tower. The first floor was sumptuously furnished in the luxurious style of the Louis XIV. period. The principal apartment, called the saloon, was on the north side, four windows looking towards Lady Elsie's Bower, and a lantern window in the north-west corner commanding a glorious moorland view, sweeping the horizon for three points of the compass. I used often, when the sun was bright, to take a seat there, and, whilst drinking my fill of the lovely landscape, wander back in imagination to the mountain valley where I had seen my father for the first, and probably, I thought, for the last, time.

The room was hung with tapestry of quite a different character to that in the nurseries. The scenes were mythological, the loves of Olympus being represented in a glowing style, very different to the austere pictures of the Dutch school, which I gazed at from my cot. The whole decoration of the chamber was thoroughly French, and pleased my young eyes, as it was bright and cheery and full of colour. I used to spend many a pleasant hour in the saloon, gazing at the voluptuous gods and goddesses, and thinking how cold they must have been in their scant clothing, forgetting that the climate of Olympus was more genial than that of Scotland.

There was a spinet or harpsichord in the room, which attracted me, not only from its decoration of Cupids carrying garlands of flowers, but from the fact that it was a musical instrument. I was passionately fond of music, as I have said, and, having an exceptional ear, was able to pick out

a tune. But I only ventured to touch the notes on very sunny days, feeling there was something mysterious about the wires, which woke the midnight silence with such weird, sad melodies.

It never occurred to me to feel really nervous in the saloon, though had I been older and wiser I should have found plenty of cause. I was never alone in that room. I used to hear strange, inexplicable noises —the fall of footsteps and the *frou-frou* of silk robes. Sometimes a deep-drawn sigh would make me turn round in the full certainty of seeing a human figure standing over me. I never saw any one, though I have often hunted behind the great lacquer screen and in every possible hiding-place.

Whenever I told Nannie of the mysterious noises, she always changed the subject, and I was too much of a child to pursue it against her will.

As I grew in years and intelligence, I

became more puzzled. I was so accustomed to the footsteps which followed me in the passages that the sound did not affect me much; but the melodies from the saloon were so pronounced that I felt they could not be produced without hands, and more than once I have got up on moonlight nights and run into the room to catch the musician; but, though the chords were actually vibrating when I entered, there was no one at the instrument.

There was one thing which had lately begun to occupy my attention. Between the nursery door and that of the saloon was another, which was always locked. I wanted to get into the closed room, but Nannie said the key was lost, and Hamish gave me an evasive answer when I asked him to look for it. I felt there was a mystery to unravel, and I set myself to unravel it. I peeped through the keyhole, and saw that the light was admitted through windows, the panes of which were

thick with dust and dirt. Between the two windows looking on the quadrangle hung a large picture, which I fancied was the portrait of a young girl in a white dress. The room was spacious, and wainscoted with oak richly carved; the heavy furniture was also oak. The thick curtains with heavy valances, combined with the dusty glass in the windows, kept up a perpetual twilight, so that nothing was clearly visible, except on the very brightest summer days. I often heard strange noises in the oak room, which they said was the rats; and on one cold winter night, when the moor was white with snow, I distinctly heard an infant's wail. That was a cat, Nannie told me. Why did not the cat kill the rats? I asked naturally. No, I neither believed in the cats nor the rats, and set myself with redoubled energy to find the key.

A year passed away. Winter was again spreading a white winding-sheet over the

dead heather. I had almost given up my search. It seemed a hopeless quest, but I was nearer the finding than I thought.

One evening I was chatting to Kenneth whilst he trimmed the lamps. He wanted a new wick. I followed him to the drawer where the wicks were kept. I had never looked in such an unlikely and public place; but as Kenneth turned over a quantity of odds and ends, I spied something glittering at the bottom of the drawer. It was the handle of a key worked in florid brass-work, exactly like the key of the saloon door. I was too clever to seize it at once, but turned away with an affected unconcern.

As soon as Kenneth had lighted the lamps and gone out to give a last look at the cows and horses, I crept to the drawer, pounced on the key, and hid it in my pocket. I sat down on the hearth to play with the kitten. I was already an actress, but, like all novices, overacted my part. I

was supremely careless, and chattered almost hysterically on everything and nothing. Nannie observed a peculiarity in my manner, and I had to explain away my burning cheeks by blaming the roaring fire.

Bedtime came, and for once I did not beg to sit up longer. I was afraid Nannie might feel the heavy key in my pocket when she took off my dress. How and where could I hide it? I ran on before her into the day nursery, where the moonlight shone brightly through the frost-flowered panes. My doll was on the floor. I picked it up, and pushed the key up her back, under the clothes. Old as I was—eleven last birthday—I was often baby enough to take Dolly to bed. I was thus enabled, without exciting Nannie's suspicions, to keep the key close to me. I pretended to fall asleep with my doll in my arms.

“Poor little woman!” I heard Nannie

say. “How tired she must be!” She tucked me up and was soon in bed herself. I found it difficult to keep awake, even though I was on the verge of solving a mystery that had puzzled me for months. I did manage it, however, and before long had the satisfaction of hearing Nannie’s regular breathing settling down into a snore.

I took the key from its hiding-place, and sat up. I looked at it for the first time carefully, and was persuaded it was the key I wanted. At that moment I heard a sharp cry.

“What is that?” I cried, startled into forgetting that I did not want to rouse Nannie.

“Jist the cats,” muttered nurse, half asleep. “Go ye to sleep, there’s a dearie.”

Sleep! The idea of sleep for me, with the key in my hand, and that wail ringing in my ears!

Nurse was snoring again. I slipped on

my dressing-gown, and crept quietly to the door. I turned the handle gently, but not without making a slight creaking noise. I stood still for a minute, fearing it might have disturbed Nannie. The snoring was as loud as ever. I stepped into the passage, and walked to the door of the mysterious chamber. Trembling with cold and fear, I put the key in the hole. It fitted exactly, and turned easily.

I opened the door. The infant's wail rang piteously through the air. I thought of running back to my bed, but curiosity mastered nervousness. The room was decidedly inhabited; but by whom? To think that all these years some one was living close to me and I had never seen that person! The mystery was more exciting than ever.

I peered into the moonshine. Oh, that I had never looked into that room! I saw a sight that took away my breath and power of motion. A woman stood a couple

of yards in front of me. She was dressed in black, which made her face more ghastly white from the contrast. Intuitively my eyes sought the portrait above her. Could that lovely laughing girl be the wan-faced lady before me? She was hugging a baby to her breast. It was not the sight of the woman that so appalled me. It never occurred to me that it was anything but a woman in the flesh. It was the horror on her pale face that froze my heart. I shall never forget that look of indescribable agony, never to my dying day. The lady was very beautiful, white as a lily; but, oh! she seemed so inutterably sad, as she gazed imploringly at me. There was a prayer in her speechless look, more eloquent than words. I could have died to grant her request, if I only knew what it was. I could not ask; my tongue was tied. Tears came into my eyes and a sympathetic sob from the bottom of my heart. She moved away with a motion which was neither

walking nor flying, keeping her sorrow-sad eyes on me. They seemed to say, "Follow me." I could not help but obey. I was drawn after her by an irresistible force, which I can neither describe nor explain. I do not think I was exactly frightened, only cut to the heart by the poor lady's pitiful face and the wailing of the child. Not even then did it strike me that it was a spiritual manifestation. Why should it? I had never heard of such things as ghosts. Nannie was as careful as any mother to keep me in ignorance of anything likely to frighten me, and she had special reasons for being silent on the subject of ghosts in that haunted castle on the moor.

The lady crossed the chamber as silently as in a dream. I followed her. In the remotest corner she turned, fixed her imploring eyes on me, and vanished. I stood alone in the moonlight, wondering what had become of the black-robed lady. The baby's wail came up from the snow.

I could see no door in the wainscote, but, on approaching the spot where the lady had disappeared, a cold current of air struck upon my naked legs. I found that one of the panels was movable, and was partially pushed back. This secret door opened on to a staircase in the wall. A bitter blast met me as I began to descend. I remembered now a small door in the western wall, which I had often tried to open. I had asked Hamish what was its use, and he had answered none ; where it led, nowhere.

I stepped out upon the moor, glistening with sparkling snow crystals. The snow was frozen crisp ; it crunched under my little feet. I heard the baby's cry. There was the lady. She stood out black against the dazzling whiteness. She seemed to be waiting for me, and then went on in the direction of Lady Elsie's Bower. I wondered why she left no footprints in the snow. Half-way between the castle and

the birches she stopped, and waited till I could almost have touched her. I thought she was going to speak, but she only gave me another beseeching look from her sweet sad eyes, and floated on. I could not choose but follow—follow to my death, as I should have thought I was doing had I been in the possession of my senses. It was freezing hard, and there was I in my night-clothes, with nothing on my golden curls, tramping with naked feet on the biting snow ! I was led on unconsciously by a mysterious sympathy, which banished fear and prudence, and lulled my senses in a waking dream of pity and horror.

The stems of the birches shone silvery in the moonlight, and their branches, white with snow and rime, had the appearance of huge plumes.

The lady glided up the slope fifty paces in front of me. I followed as fast as my frozen feet could carry me. There were two trees behind the stone seat, which

formed a dazzling canopy over it. She stood between them, and pointed to the ground, gazing at me with those praying eyes of hers. I advanced to the spot where she was standing, wishing to grasp her hand, and ask how I could help her.

She was gone! I sank on the cold snow. I remember nothing more.

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

It was many days before I recovered consciousness. What happened after I fainted under the birches, I have, of course, only learned from others.

I must have lain a considerable time where I dropped. The only wonder was that I was picked up alive. My nurse, providentially for me, but not for herself, had a dream, which made her start up in her bed. She saw that mine was empty and the door open. She ran into the passage, calling my name, and found the door of the haunted room thrown back. She looked in ; but I was not there. She

rushed like a wild creature to the farmhouse, shouting for her father and brother. They and Effie soon joined her, thinking that the house must be on fire.

“ My bairn is gone ! ” she cried. “ The ghost has carried her off. My bairnie ! my bairnie ! ”

They all went together to the haunted chamber, where Kenneth’s sharp eyes spied the sliding panel. They ran down the winding stairs, and saw my little footprints on the snow. Hamish wished his two daughters to return to the kitchen and see to the fire. Nannie would not go back without her darling, so Effie went off alone to prepare to receive me, alive or dead.

The three tracked my footprints to Lady Elsie’s Bower, where they found me as white and almost as cold as the snow on which I lay. Hamish lifted me in his arms. I was stiff as a corpse, and they all thought that I was one. It was a sad procession that accompanied me back to

the castle. Effie had made up the kitchen fire, which fortunately was not out, and had hot water and blankets ready. Nannie, speechless with sorrow, took me from her father's arms, and, with Effie's help, rubbed my frozen limbs till, to their great joy, warmth returned slowly to my body, and my breath became audible.

I remained for a week on the borderland of life and death. The local doctor was so puzzled with my state that he sent for the best medical advice from Aberdeen. All that could be done was to leave me to Nature, and to trust that youth and a strong constitution would pull me through. It seemed a sorry chance.

The doctor from Aberdeen smiled incredulously when Nannie told him that she attributed my unconscious condition as much to ghost-fright as cold. He listened to her story of the Black Lady, who appeared from time to time; but only when the snow was on the ground, and asked if

she or any one had ever seen her ; but was told that the ghost was only visible to members of the Dampier family, and had seldom appeared to any of them, except the owner of Craigie Castle or his heir. Nannie told him of all the strange noises they were accustomed to hear—the footsteps, the rustling of silk robes, the music of the spinet, the wailing of the babe. The doctor remained unbelieving, even when Hamish assured him that the ghost had driven my grandfather from the castle, and that the story of the snow lady was as well known in the neighbourhood as the tower itself.

This was the story. Lady Elsie, whose name clung to the seat where I was found, was the only child of a laird of Craigie, two hundred years back. She was very lovely, and as good as she was fair ; the darling of her parents, and the pride of the countryside. She had made a runaway marriage with a young officer in the

army. Her parents thought it a *més-alliance*, and in their wicked pride said that they would never see her again. They put on mourning for the daughter they had loved so tenderly and now hated so bitterly, and desired that her name should never be mentioned in their presence. They had not now a daughter; she was dead to them, and they tried to stamp her memory out of their lives. The young husband was ordered on foreign service, and fell at Malplaquet. The widow found herself penniless, with an infant at her breast, and wrote home to implore forgiveness and assistance in her forlorn condition. The father replied that she might starve for all he cared. In despair she made her way from Edinburgh, and on a bitter winter's night trudged, with her baby in her arms, through the snow to her old home. She knew that she would be refused admission if she knocked at the castle door, and, remem-

bering the secret stairs and the sliding panel, she made her way to her father's presence. On her knees she prayed him to pardon her, if not for the sake of the old love, for the sake of her fatherless infant, perishing from cold and want of sustenance. Sir Vere rose from his chair, and, cursing her, drove her down the winding stairs out on to the moor. He locked the door behind her. The poor lady staggered through the blinding snow, which was now falling heavily. Under the silver birches by the seat that bore her name she lay down to die, her infant wailing in her arms. Death was not long in coming to mother and child. Before morning dawned, they lay three feet beneath the snow. The snow grew deeper as the days went by, for it was a winter to be remembered for its length and severity. There she and her hapless babe slept in their cold bed, till spring lifted the white sheet. Sir Vere and Lady

Dampier had gone south, and never saw their Scottish home again. They both died within a short period of one another, of a strange and unknown disease, which those who knew their daughter's story judged to be a divine punishment for their pride and cruelty. The property passed to a distant branch of the family, to whom Lady Elsie was only a name. The snow lady became an object of terror to all, for those who did not see her with their eyes heard the rustle of her dress, the fall of her feet, and the wailing of the child. My grandfather would gladly have sold Craigie Castle, but purchasers were not to be found for a house with such an uncanny reputation; so he had built the lodge and deserted the castle.

This was Hamish's story; but the doctors were scientifically incredulous till they heard more from me.

It was quite a month before I entirely recovered speech and reason. I lay in a

dull stupor, taking nourishment mechanically, but never opening my eyes. At the end of that period, my tongue was unloosed, and, calling for Nannie, my eyes still closed, I used to wander over the story of my journey through the snow, and how the poor lady had pointed to the ground behind the seat. I repeated this so often that it made a strong impression on Hamish, who went out one morning with his spade, and dug up the earth between the two birches. It was not long before he turned up a human skeleton, holding a baby skeleton in its fleshless arms. The mystery was solved. The poor lady who haunted Craigie Castle could not rest till she found Christian burial for herself and child in some spot of holy ground.

The doctors saw now that there was method in my madness, and took a much more hopeful view of my case, for my ravings were not the creation of a dis-

ordered brain ; they began, too, to believe that there might be some things not dreamed of in their philosophy. The bones of mother and child were carried to the nearest churchyard, and buried by our minister, with all the rites of our religion.

I learned all this later ; and it was a great consolation in my troubles to feel that I had been able to give rest and comfort to the poor wan-faced lady, and hush the wailing of her babe. She nearly led me to my death, but I think I could gladly have died on such a mission of mercy. Had I never risen alive from her unconsecrated grave, I should have escaped a sorrow which nearly broke my young heart.

CHAPTER VI.

A BITTER BLOW.

WHEN I opened my eyes to consciousness, after a weary morn of oblivion, my first desire was to see my nurse. I longed to rest my tired head upon her loving breast, and to hear her sweet voice sing me off to my first refreshing sleep. I wanted to tell her all about my adventure, and ask her if the snow lady had been seen again. I wanted especially to find out what she thought was the meaning of the lady's mute appeal, when she pointed to the ground before she vanished. I had to ask forgiveness from my Nannie for my curiosity, and for acting as I knew she

would never have permitted me to act ; to beg her to trust me once more, and to let me be again her own dear child, her little naughty but repentant Nellie. Oh, I had so much to say, so much to be forgiven, so much love to return my Nannie, for all her loving care during my long illness ! It seemed to be years since that dreadful night upon the snow ; and I felt that I owed my life to the nursing—and who could have nursed me so tenderly and cleverly as Nannie ? I knew that I must have been very near the gates of the unseen world, and felt that it must have been her motherly watchfulness that had prevented my passing through them. I had an impression that her loving hands had smoothed my pillow, and had brought a pleasant feeling of refreshment when placed upon my burning brow ; and somehow I think I must have missed her lately. When I opened my eyes, I looked round the room for Nannie ; but she was not

there. I saw a stranger in a dress I had never seen before. She had a sweet face, and when I asked her who she was, she told me, in a soft voice, that she was a nursing sister from Aberdeen.

“Where is my ain Nannie?” I asked.

“Your nurse is not well. She has done too much, and was very tired; so the doctor sent for me to take care of you in her place.”

“I would raither have my Nannie.”

“I am sure you would; but you must try and put up with me for the present, dear child.”

“May I not see her? She loves me sae. I am sure it would mak’ her weel to set her eyes on me, noo that I am better.”

“You cannot see her now, darling. She is too ill to come to you, and you cannot go to her. You must not leave your bed till you are stronger.”

“We maun both of us try to get weel as quickly as we can, that we may see

each other. I wonder which will be out of bed the first?"

"I hope my patient will soon be up," the sister answered, turning her face away, as if to hide some emotion.

Effie peeped into the room. My new nurse beckoned her to go away; but I was too quick, and called her in. She came to my bedside. What a wreck of pretty, bonnie Effie! She was pale and thin, and her eyes were red.

"Are you ill, too, Effie?" I asked.

"No ill, but unco' tired. I am going to lie doun noo, but I maun tak' a kiss before I go. I am so pleased to see that you are sae muckle better, Miss Nellie."

"What has tired you, Effie? You don't look a bit pretty noo."

"I have told my child that her nurse is ill," said the sister, as Effie looked at her before answering my question.

"Jeanie is unco' bad, missie, and I hae to nurse her. Kenneth is with her the noo."

“When will she be well? I’m wantin’ to see her sae badly.”

“Ask the guid Lord to mak’ her better,” said Effie, with tears welling in her eyes.

“I must not allow my little patient to talk any more; so run away, Effie, and get a nice rest.”

“When you see Nannie, give her a big kiss frae her bairn, and tell her that I maun go to her if she canna come to me.”

“I fear you maun go to her, dearie;” and as she kissed me a tear fell upon my cheek. She left the room hastily.

I was too weak to ask any more questions, or even to think of Nannie and her illness. The sister gave me a draught, and I fell asleep, muttering, “Nannie, my ain dear Nannie!”

Strength returned gradually, but slowly. I could not leave my bed. Effie brought me messages from Nannie, and took mine back. The messages were not like Nannie’s —at least, not expressed in Nannie’s words

—I thought Effie altered them in transmission.

The hospital nurse was a kindly creature, gentle, sympathetic, and yet determined. I soon learned to love her, and obey her slightest look. She tried to be cheerful, but I saw that there was something that checked her when she began to amuse me. At last convalescence really set in. I was to get up and lie on a sofa. I promised myself the pleasure of paying Nannie a visit in a couple of days, at latest. Sister Lucy looked at me sadly when I expressed my intention to do so. I wondered why.

For three days Effie had not been near me. Hamish was to have seen me for the first time, but he, too, kept away. I began to feel the strange neglect very acutely. The sister was always trying to frame excuses for them, but they were lame and unreal. She did her best to divert my mind from the subject, by telling me interesting stories and petting me to my

heart's content. I felt a sort of presentiment that something was wrong, and asked if Nannie's illness was infectious.

On Sunday morning I told Sister Lucy that I meant to see Nannie that day. I could wait no longer. I had breakfasted as usual in bed, and she had just taken the tray out of the room. I was lying quietly, thinking of the coming pleasure, when my ears caught the sound of hushed voices below my window. I lay and listened. There was the tread of many feet. What could it mean? I heard, too, an usual fluttering amongst the poultry, and now and then a dog gave an angry howl.

I was so curious to know what was going on that I crept out of bed, with a blanket wrapt round me. I mounted on the window-seat and looked out. There were some twenty men and women huddled together round the farmhouse door. Sorrow and expectation were on every face. The women were mostly dressed in black. I

recognized many in the crowd as fellow-worshippers at our little kirk. I was intensely puzzled to know what could be the reason for this unusual gathering.

There was a movement in the throng. The eyes of all turned to the door. Those behind stood on tiptoe to see over the shoulders of those in front. There came a dead silence. The men uncovered their heads. I held my breath, and pressed my face against the glass. Two men came out. They were Hamish and Kenneth. Effie followed in deep mourning. They were all evidently in great affliction. Effie held a white handkerchief to her streaming eyes, and Kenneth often rubbed the back of his hand across his face to brush away the tears. The bystanders pressed round to shake them by the hand, and to offer them their sympathy. Then from the doorway came two men with something on their shoulders, and then two others, supporting the hinder part of what I judged

to be a coffin, though I had never seen one before.

I understood now that death had been in the house, and a sudden spasm seized my heart. Could it be my Nannie who was being carried to her grave? Everybody was there but her.

“Nannie! Nannie!” I shrieked.

Sister Lucy came back into the nursery, and was dismayed to find me at the window.

“I ought never to have left you, my child,” she cried, as she threw her arms round me, and tried to drag me away.

“Dinna tak’ me off! I maun bide here. Is na that box a coffin?”

“Yes, my darling. Come away; it is not a sight for you. You will take cold.”

“Is Nannie dead?”

“Your dear nurse has gone to heaven, dearie. She was in such pain that the good Lord took her to Himself. There is no pain where she now is, no sorrow.

You would not wish to bring her back, Nellie?"

"Ay, would I! They are cruel to carry off my Nannie. Oh, Nannie, dinna leave me—dinna leave your wee Nellie! Ye're a' I hae to love—the only one to love me. Come back, Nannie! Hamish, Kenneth, Effie, bring her back. Ye shall not carry off my Nannie—my ain darling Nannie! I shall die gin ye tak' my Nannie awa'!"

"Hush, my child!" whispered Sister Lucy, still trying to drag me away from the window; but I held on tightly to the casement latch.

"I maun look at them," I cried in despair. "I will be sae dooce if you will let me bide at the window."

She took me in her arms, and held me up to look at the sad procession which was forming in the quadrangle. The coffin went first; then came Hamish, with Effie leaning heavily on his arm, as if for support. She

was sobbing bitterly. Kenneth walked on her other side. The rest followed two and two. All passed slowly out of the gateway.

“I maun go to her!” I cried, struggling to free myself from Sister Lucy’s arms. “They shall na tak’ her awa’ i’ the box! Let me kiss her just once—just say one good-bye.”

“It is too late now, dear child;” and she held me tighter, trying at the same time to soothe me with loving words.

The quadrangle was empty. Nannie was gone never to return. I should never see her sweet face again, never hear her soft caressing voice, never feel her loving arms strain me to the warmest heart that ever beat in woman’s breast!

“There is naebody left to love me noo,” I sobbed. “Papa hates me, and mamma canna care for me, or she’d come and see her bairn. Oh, what shall I do without my Nannie?”

“ You have plenty left to love you. Hamish and Kenneth and Effie—they all love you ; and I love you, too, my child, very dearly.”

“ Naebody loves me like Nannie. I dinna want to love you.”

“ Why, Nellie, that is not kind.”

“ I mean, I dinna want to love you ower muckle. You will leave me as soon as I am strong ; you said you would. Oh, Nannie ! what for did you die ? It was real unkind of God to take ye awa’ frae me.”

“ Hush, my darling ! you must not say that. Nannie would not like to hear you. You must try and be a good child, and then you will see her again some bright day.”

“ I want to see her the noo. I should like to die gin I could go straight to her ; ” and I hid my face in the pillow, where Sister Lucy had laid me.

I tried hard to die, but death would not

come at my wish. I sobbed myself to sleep, and dreamed that Nannie was alive and well, and I was lying in her arms. But oh the aching void when I woke and found it was a dream—only a dream !

I felt that I was guilty of her death. I was sure that her illness was in some way connected with that disastrous night which had laid me low. I learned afterwards that it was so, that in following me across the snow she had taken a chill, which had fallen on her lungs. After three weeks of acute suffering, followed by one of unconsciousness, the flame of life flickered and went out.

That strange night's work had laid me on a bed of sickness and my Nannie in her grave. It brought me, however, one consolation. The snow lady and her infant were at rest. The ghost of Craigie Castle was laid.

But oh ! at what a price !

CHAPTER VII.

EATON SQUARE.

ONE would have thought that such a trouble would have retarded my recovery. Strange to say, it did not. For many nights I sobbed myself to sleep, but my heart was too young to break, and youth and the flood-tide of returning health carried me on through the dark days of winter and woe, till spring brought beauty to the earth and some solace to my sorrow.

Sister Lucy was still with me. Her sweet presence was an education in itself. Her manners were ladylike and refined, as they should have been, seeing that she was the daughter of a Scotch baronet, and had

been brought up in a family circle as intellectual as high-bred. She had chosen the vocation of a nursing sister, not as the means of making a livelihood, but from an earnest desire to aid in alleviating the sufferings of humanity.

Sister Lucy was able to sympathize with me in my new trouble, for her heart had been well-nigh broken, she told me, by the loss of one she dearly loved. She had found, however, a peace that passeth knowledge in sacrifice of self and work for others, and was able to impart some of that peace to her little patient. Young as I was, I felt her influence for good, and dreaded losing so loving and sympathetic a mentor. I knew that the rules of her sisterhood would not allow her to remain with me after convalescence, so that I was in no hurry to get well.

Two months after the death of my dear nurse, the doctor said that my health was perfectly restored, and that he could no

longer report to the institution at Aberdeen that I required the services of one of the sisters. Sister Lucy told me that she must soon leave me, and go to some one who needed her more than I did. I could not conceive such a thing possible. Who could want her more than a poor neglected child, who had never known a parent's love, and had now lost the dear nurse who had been to her more than father and mother? I tried to coax her to give up nursing altogether, and to mother me instead. Sometimes I thought that I almost persuaded her, and that she would have remained with me if my unnatural guardians had wished it.

I saw that she was in correspondence with some of my belongings, as she dropped hints from time to time that my sojourn in the north would not be long. I knew that the doctors were of opinion that my illness had left a delicacy which would be benefited by a softer and more genial climate.

Now that my Nannie had left me, the castle seemed to have lost much of its homelike feeling. We no longer spent our evenings in the farmhouse. Sister Lucy thought that I was getting too old for the society of gillies, and wanted to break me of my strong Scotch accent. I loved Hamish and his son and daughter as much as ever, but I could not help seeing that their manners and speech were very different to those of the sister, who was now my companion. A sort of reserve sprang up between us, which was increased on my side by an idea that they looked on me as indirectly the cause of Nannie's death. Effie became more of a maid and less of a friend, as the difference of position between the baronet's and the bailiff's daughter made her shy in Sister Lucy's presence, and prevented her from treating me with the familiarity of former years.

I now took all my lessons from the sister. The longer I was with her, the more I felt

that the Macphersons were not exactly the style of companions suited for the daughter of Sir Lionel Dampier. I was ashamed of this feeling, and did not like to acknowledge its existence, even to myself. The barrier between us was, however, daily growing larger, but it was as much their building as mine. I was no longer a child to be petted. I was now eleven years old, and a big girl for my age, having grown much during my recent illness. All this made the prospect of separation less painful, and I was able to look on sundry symptoms of a coming move with more composure than I should have thought possible a month ago.

The summons came at last. Sister Lucy heard from my grandmother, Lady Dampier, that I was to change the bleak Scotch air for the mild climate of the South of England. It was the first time that the existence of a grandmother had been mentioned to me, and I hoped that it was only the

commencement of intercourse with my family. I was to see Lady Dampier, at all events, as Sister Lucy was to bring me to London, whence my grandmother would send me on to my new home in Hampshire.

On hearing the tidings, there was a mixture of pleasure and sorrow in my heart, and for a time sorrow was uppermost. I was leaving the home of my childhood, and many happy, many tender memories. I was leaving my dear nurse behind in a still turfless grave. I was leaving warm hearts that had loved me from my infancy to trust myself to others, who might be cruel to the stranger.

On the other hand, I was to visit new scenes and mingle with fresh faces, and change is a child's paradise. I was to live in England, too, nearer my father's home. I might, perhaps, see both my parents, and conquer the hate of one and the indifference of the other; for I began to feel

that I had winning ways, and my glass told me that I was very fair to look on.

I ran into the orchard with the letter which Sister Lucy had handed to me. It was the first communication from my family, and I wished to read it by myself, though it was not addressed to me. I threw myself under an apple tree, and did not find the letter as pleasant reading as I expected. It was curt and barely civil. I was called “the child,” and the tone of the letter was that of a mistress giving orders to a servant. Perhaps my grandmother did not know that Sister Lucy was a lady; but, whatever she thought, the letter was not courteous, and did not certainly prepossess me in favour of the writer. I felt put out. My thoughts travelled back to the treatment I had met from my father, and I began to suspect that my grandmother would not be much kinder.

The tears came into my eyes. I placed

my hands under my head, and looked up at the branches white with blossom. The gentle spring breeze shook off the petals, which fell on me like a shower of perfumed snow. There was something in the blue sky, the soft air, the sunshine flickering through the apple sprays, that cheered my heart and dried my tears. The birds were singing in their nests; there was a sleepy murmur of insect life above the daffodils. Winter was really gone, and my heart, which had been as nearly broken as a young heart could be, took its tone from nature, and fluttered joyously with the early butterflies and the humming bees. I would look on the sunny side, and not anticipate unkindness or unhappiness in my new life. In the past life I had had enough of sorrow. I went back singing to the house, and returned the letter to Sister Lucy without comment.

When the day, however, approached on which I was to break with the past, I

knew by the lump in my throat that I could not leave my kind friends at Craigie Castle without much tearing of the heart-strings. I began to follow them about in turns, taking them by the hand, and looking up wistfully into their faces. Both Hamish and Kenneth sometimes turned away to hide a tear, I thought. Effie cried outright, and pressed me to her heart. I made her take me to her sister's grave. There I threw myself on the unsightly mound, and pressed my lips on the flowerless earth. I called to my Nannie to come back to me, just to give me a parting kiss ; but no answer was returned from the silent grave, where the past was buried with her who had made all its happiness.

The day of my departure arrived. The dark present absorbed all the light of life. I clung to Hamish, laying my wet cheek on his tawny beard whilst I sobbed as if my heart would break.

“ Forgive me, Hamie,” I whispered.

“Forgive my bairn? For what?”

“For killing Nannie. It was a’ my fault—a’ my fault.”

“It was God who took her to Himself. Ye must not fret, puir lassie, at His will.”

“You will forgive me, then, before I go, Hamie?”

“I have nothing to forgive.”

“Never mind. Say you forgive me from the bottom of your heart.”

“I forgive ye, my ain dear bairn, from the bottom of my heart.”

“Kenneth and Effie maun say the same, and then I shall not greet sae sorely.”

They did as I asked them. I clung to them in turn, till Sister Lucy, thinking wisely that the parting should be shortened, got into the carriage and told Hamish to place me by her side. The eyes of all were moist with tears as we drove off amidst a shower of blessings. Rannock ran barking by my side. Hamish loved the dog almost

as much as I did, but he had given him to me as a parting gift.

It was a long drive, and though we started very early, we only reached Aberdeen in time to snatch a hurried dinner before taking the express. I had never been in a town before, and the long streets of granite houses overpowered me with surprise and admiration. After the solitude of Craigie, the foot-passengers seemed to be crowds, and the carts and carriages countless. The bustle at the station almost turned my head, whilst the hissing engine half frightened me out of my senses.

Once off, I knelt upon the seat, and, looking through the window, gazed at the rushing landscape. Towns, villages, country houses, trees, fields full of grazing cattle, fled by in bewildering succession. The noise of the rolling wheels seemed to play a monotonous tune, varied only by a whish through railway stations when we did not stop, and the creaking of the brake when

we did. Sister Lucy was amused at my excited interest in everything I saw. All was new to me, and my questions were endless. She never wearied in answering them. She pointed out the Grampian Mountains and the Sidlaw Hills; stately castles, old kirks; Perth, with its meadow inches by the river Tay; the ruins of Dunkeld Abbey; the Bridge of Allan, with the white villas on the hill above; the palace of the old Scotch kings on Stirling Rock, and the battlefield of Bannockburn. The iron furnaces of Falkirk blazed red in the gathering darkness, and soon the lights of Edinburgh gleamed like a pyramid of stars. I clapped my hands with delight at the magic sight, and, rushing under a frowning castle, our train drew up in a large railway station.

Prince's Street, with its gas lamps and brilliantly lighted shops, was a dream of fairyland to my wondering but sleepy eyes, so sleepy that I begged for bed

instead of supper, and never woke till the sun was high in heaven.

I wanted so much to see some of the beauties of the modern Athens, that I persuaded Sister Lucy to postpone our departure till the night express. She telegraphed to Lady Dampier that we should not arrive in Eaton Square till the following morning.

Shops full of unknown wares dazzled my eyes and delayed us on our way to the Carlton Hill, which Kenneth patriotically had told me commanded the finest view in the wide world. When I stood on the Scotch acropolis I was quite prepared to endorse Kenneth's assertion. But what were purple hills, a shimmering sea, to say nothing of the majestic crags of Arthur's Seat, compared to bustling streets and gay shop windows—at least, to one like myself, brought up on fine views and far from the madding crowd?

The journey from Edinburgh to London

was a blank, as I slept from one metropolis to the other. I woke in a wilderness of houses, where street followed street in aggravating similarity, and the sky was black with the smoke from myriads of chimney-pots. If there were crowds in Aberdeen and Edinburgh, there were mobs in London : carts, carriages, and cabs blocked the thoroughfares till they certainly did not appear to deserve the name, and passengers jostled each other on the pavements. I clung to my companion, fearing every moment that our cab would be crushed between lumbering waggons and top-heavy omnibuses. Rannock, who was lying on the seat opposite me, looked almost as bewildered and frightened as his mistress. The streets became less crowded as we journeyed west, and the network of houses was broken now and again by verdant squares of turf and trees. At last our road ran beside a great park, across which I was shown the palace of our

Queen. I was much struck with a huge bronze horse on a marble arch. It was not like any horse I had ever seen, but Sister Lucy said it was a horse, and that the rider was the great Duke of Wellington. A peep of another park, through handsome iron gates, and we rattled down a hill and through a great square into a long narrow one. It was Eaton Square, and we drew up at the door of my father's town house.

The door was thrown open by two men with powdered heads and gay uniforms, who seemed very annoyed when Rannock leaped up to greet them. Behind stood a gentleman in black, whom I took for the chaplain, till he led us to the dining-room and announced our names in a loud voice. Old Lady Dampier was at breakfast, and did not like the interruption of her meal. She stared at us through gold eye-glasses. I advanced timidly, and was going to throw my arms round her neck.

“Don’t kiss me!” cried the dowager.
“You may shake hands, if you like.”

I retreated before this rebuff, looking at her all the time. She was a beautiful old lady, with a cluster of white curls on each side of a white brow. Her face was fresh and her eyes bright. She was richly dressed in black satin, and wore a cap of rare lace, relieved with a pink bow. She was a charming specimen of an old English lady, one of the pleasantest types in creation. I could have kissed her rosy cheeks with pleasure, or pressed her little hand, which sparkled with jewelled rings. There were not any wrinkles on either ; indeed, there were no indications of age about her, except the snow-white hair. I backed slowly up to where Sister Lucy was standing, and took hold of her hand. I was frightened at the look of hatred in my grandmother’s face. She seemed such a sweet old lady ; it was hard to credit that such a pleasant exterior could cover

such a wicked heart as I saw peeping from her eyes.

“Where are your manners, child?” she said. “Don’t keep staring at me like that. But why should I expect you to have any manners?” she added significantly.

“Miss Dampier has very pretty manners, I assure you,” said Sister Lucy.

“I dare say our ideas of good breeding are different,” my grandmother answered, with a sneer.

“I think they are,” said Sister Lucy, very quietly.

“I expected you yesterday,” observed Lady Dampier. “I had made all my arrangements. What detained you in Edinburgh?”

“Miss Dampier wished so much to see something of the beautiful city, that I thought you would not object to our being a few hours later than we intended. Of course you received my telegram?”

“I hate telegrams. There was no possible reason for altering settled plans. A child’s whim, indeed! You have put me to great inconvenience, Nurse Christie. I shall report your conduct at the home.”

“You are at perfect liberty to do so, Lady Dampier. I have taken the journey entirely to oblige you, and out of love of this dear child. It is quite apart from my usual duties.”

“You will be paid, so do not put on that injured air.”

“I have nothing to say to money payments, madam. We sisters are allowed only to receive the nursing fees fixed by our home, which we pay over at once to the treasurer. In the present case I shall refuse to have any pecuniary transactions. You will kindly settle with the home for my services.”

“Hoity-toity! I did not know that hospital nurses gave themselves such airs.”

“I hope you think Miss Dampier looking

well ?" said Sister Lucy, ignoring my grandmother's rude speeches. " She has had a serious illness, but I hope we may now call her convalescent."

" She deserved to be ill. Little girls ought to be well punished for such naughtiness—running about the country at night without any clothes on ! "

" I could na help following the snow leddy," I put in.

" What a fearful accent the child has ! " exclaimed my grandmother.

" It is not nearly so strong as it was," replied Sister Lucy. " Nellie is trying to speak more as a lady should ; but it is hard at first. She has only lived amongst peasants. It is not the poor child's fault."

" You could not help following the ghost ?" said Lady Dampier. " You need not have gone into the haunted room."

" I did not know it was haunted."

" Well, you ought to have stayed in

your bed. Your nurse ought to have looked better after you."

"It was not Nannie's fault. Dinna blame her. She was the best and kindest and dearest nurse in a' the world. You may call me bad and naughty, but I won't hear one word against her. She is dead, and it's me that killed her, my own dear, bonny Nannie!"

"You killed your nurse!" exclaimed the dowager, with affected horror. "I did not think you were bad enough for that!"

"Miss Dampier means that her nurse died from the result of a cold caught in rescuing her from the snow."

"Well, you need not cry so. It was your own fault that you have lost Jeanie Macpherson. Tears won't bring her back."

"Take me awa', Sister Lucy!" I cried, between my sobs. "Take me awa' from this wicked old woman!"

"Wicked old woman!" shrieked Lady Dampier, rising from her seat for the first

time, her whole face transfigured by passion. “ You dare call me a wicked old woman, you little devil—you little—— ”

Rannock, who had followed us into the room, growled angrily, and, springing in between me and my infuriated grandmother, stopped the flood of her abuse.

“ Whisht, Rannock ! ” I cried. “ Lie down, good dog.”

“ Good dog ! Do you call that savage brute a good dog ? ” cried the dowager.

“ He’s the best-tempered dog in the world,” I answered, “ and the most faithful. He is my only friend, my only protector ; ” and I patted Rannock’s head.

“ You would like him to kill me ; I know you would.”

“ Indeed, I should not. You have been very cruel to me, but I would not let him hurt my grandmother.”

“ Your grandmother, indeed ! ” exclaimed Lady Dampier.

“ May I remind you, Lady Dampier,”

said Sister Lucy, with the view of changing the subject, “that we have not break-fasted?”

“I will order breakfast to be served for you in the housekeeper’s room;” and she went towards the bell.

“If you think the housekeeper’s room a fit place for your granddaughter,” said Sister Lucy, flushing, but very calmly, “it is not my business to interfere, but I must decline breakfasting there myself.”

“What fine airs, Miss Hospital Nurse! I shall certainly report your insolence.”

“I am not insolent, madam. I am not your servant. I can do without my breakfast, but I will not take it below-stairs.”

“You are my servant as long as you are in my pay.”

“You do not seem to be aware that I am a lady, as well-born as yourself.”

“Pray, whom have I the honour of addressing? I thought you were a nurse.”

“I am proud of the name, Lady Dampier. I am a nurse, and the daughter of Sir Philip Christie, of Blairchristie.”

“What could have induced you, Miss Christie, to degrade yourself to the position you now hold ?”

“I belong to a sisterhood of ladies, who do not think it degrading to nurse the sick and help those who are in trouble.”

“Popish rubbish ! Young ladies forget themselves nowadays. They sacrifice family ties, neglect family duties, to sit at the feet of some idiotic young curate.”

“They would sit at the feet of their Master, Lady Dampier. But I will not intrude any longer. I have delivered Miss Dampier into your hands, and will take my leave.”

“Oh, dinna leave me with grandmamma !” I cried, throwing my arms round Sister Lucy’s waist. “She hates me. No one loves me but you. Take me with you.”

My grandmother evidently thought she had made a mistake, as far as Sister Lucy was concerned, and that her insolence might be reported in circles she little expected. She rang the bell, and ordered two places to be laid for us at the breakfast-table, and prepared to ingratiate herself with Sir Philip Christie's daughter.

I was ravenously hungry, and in satisfying my appetite forgot that I was in the presence of the woman who had been so rude both to Sister Lucy and myself. A child's anger is soon appeased ; and my grandmother was now smiling and civil, at all events to Miss Christie. I began to look about me, to admire the beautiful china on the table, the bright silver, even the pretty pink cheeks of the old lady, which reminded me of ripe apples. My eyes wandered to the handsome furniture round the room, and then rose to the pictures on the walls, amongst which I recognized my father's portrait.

“That is papa!” I cried. “Look, Sister Lucy! it is just like his brown beard.”

“Eat your breakfast, child, and let Miss Christie eat hers in peace,” said my grandmother, all the anger coming back to her face.

“I have finished. May I not look at the pictures, grandmamma?”

“Sit still; and don’t call me grandmamma.”

“What am I to call you? You are my grandmamma, you know.”

“Never mind what I am; call me Lady Dampier. Who gave you leave to bring that nasty dog with you?”

“Rannock is a beautiful dog,” I answered, giving him a piece of toast: “He is thoroughbred. Hamish gave him me.”

“Who is Hamish?”

“Nannie’s father, and papa’s bailiff.”

“Macpherson, you mean. He ought to have known that such a great ugly animal was not a fit dog for a little girl like you.”

“Rannock has taken care of me since I was a baby. Nannie used to call him my under-nurse.”

“I don’t care what your nurse called the dog; he is not at all a proper companion for a young lady. Ring the bell, and I will send him to the stables. The coachman shall get rid of it.”

“Dinna send my dog awa’!” I cried, jumping off my chair, and throwing my arms round Rannock’s neck. “Dinna send him awa’, grandmamma—I mean, Lady Dampier! He is the only thing that loves me, except Sister Lucy, and she is going to leave me. Let me keep Rannock.—Ask grandmamma to let me keep him, Sister Lucy.”

“I am sure Lady Dampier will let you have Rannock in the country. He is not quite a dog for a London drawing-room.”

“I shall want something to take care of me there,” I suggested imploringly.

“I will see that you are properly looked after, without the help of a rough dog,” said Lady Dampier with a scowl.

“But I may have Rannock too?”

“We will see about that. If you and Miss Christie have finished breakfast, you can go into the library.—I suppose you return to Scotland to-day, Miss Christie?”

“Not to-day. After a night in a rumbling bed, I require a little rest.”

“It was your own fault that you travelled by night.”

“I am aware of that, Lady Dampier; but I shall stay in London, at all events, till to-morrow.”

“I am sorry I cannot offer you a bed. The child goes to Hampshire this afternoon.”

“I did not for a moment think of encroaching on your hospitality. I will stay with Nellie for a couple of hours, and then I will ask one of your servants, if you will allow me, to call a cab.”

“Where will you pass the night—at an hotel, or perhaps at a hospital?”

“At neither one nor the other, Lady Dampier. I shall sleep at my uncle’s, in Lowndes Square.”

“May I ask who your uncle may be?”

“Lord Callander, my mother’s brother.”

I think the discovery that Sister Lucy had powerful relations in London had some effect on my very odious grandmother, for she followed us into the library, and stood talking some minutes with Sister Lucy about Scotch relatives. She forgot, too, that Rannock had not been taken to the stables. She was again the pretty, pleasant old lady. She carried Miss Christie away for a little private conversation, and left me alone to gaze on a blank wall and try to catch a peep of the sky through a fringe of smoking chimney-pots. Rannock seemed as depressed as I was; we were both already pining for the pure air of our moorland home.

When Sister Lucy returned, I remarked a sad and pitiful expression on her face as she looked at me.

“Poor dear child!” she whispered, as she hugged me in her arms. A tear fell upon my cheek. “God bless and keep you, my darling. Remember, you have always a friend in me. Think of me as a second mother. Write often, and tell me of all your joys and sorrows. If you are in very real trouble, when I can help you, you have only to write or telegraph to the Home, and I will come to you. You won’t forget me, Nellie?”

“Forget you!” I cried, throwing my arms round her. “Is it likely that I should forget the only person on earth who loves me? You maun be my mother till I find my ain. I wonder when that will be!”

Sister Lucy said nothing, but sighed and pressed me close to her breast.

A neighbouring church clock struck

twelve, and shortly after one of the white-haired footmen announced that a cab was at the door. The time had come when I was to lose the dear sister who had nursed me so tenderly and loved me so truly. She kissed away my tears, and, with a last “God bless you, my own darling child!” she rushed off.

I threw myself on the floor in an agony of grief. Life seemed to be made up of bitter partings. Rannock licked my face, and tried to comfort me. I clasped my arms round his shaggy neck. He was all that was left to me—my only tie with the past.

“Please, miss, I am to take your dog to the stables,” said one of the tall footmen. “Her ladyship does not like them ragged brutes in the 'ouse. Do he bite, miss?”

“He'll bite, gin you touch him. Tak' care.”

Rannock growled savagely at the man,

who drew back, afraid for his calves and silk stockings.

“ You’d better let him come quietly, miss. If you don’t, her ladyship will order the dog to be got rid of.”

“ She daren’t ! ” I cried, jumping up. “ Rannock belongs to me.”

“ Won’t she ? You don’t know her as well as us domestics. But don’t ‘e take on so, miss. I’ll see to the dog, and give him some bones.”

“ Oh, thank you ! You dinna ken how I love my dog ; he is my only friend. Go, Rannock.”

The dog went to the servant and crouched at his feet. “ He is a nice dorg,” he said, as he stroked Rannock’s tawny head. “ He is too nice a dorg to be killed.”

“ Killed ! Who talks of killing Rannock ? ”

“ I heard her ladyship say as how the dog was to be got rid of, and that means prussic acid.”

“The wicked woman! She dare not murder my dog! You can save him. I know you will;” and I burst into tears.

“Don’t cry, miss. I can’t a-bear to see any one cry, leastwise a pretty little lady like you.”

“I won’t cry, if you will promise not to let Rannock be poisoned.”

“It will be as much as my place is worth, but I’ll risk it. I’ll speak to the butler. He has a little daughter just your age. I’ll appeal to his patriotic” (I suppose he meant paternal) “feelings. He is to take you to the station. Mr. Thompson’s a good sort, and hates my lady as much as——”

“I do,” I interrupted.

“As much as we all do. She is a tartar, and no mistake! and yet to look at her you would think she was a sucking dove.”

I felt there was a bond of union between us at once, and Rannock seemed to feel the same, for he went off with the gigantic

flunkey, wagging his tail, and barking confidentially.

The door closed, and I was alone—alone in my father's house.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW FOREST.

My grandmother did not return to the library. She never gave another thought to the poor solitary child left alone in that dark, sunless room. I tried to forget my sadness and loneliness by turning over a portfolio of engravings. They were mostly old caricatures, and, though I did not understand their point, I could not help being amused at the exaggeratedly grotesque figures in old-fashioned costumes.

After an hour or so, I began to tire of my solitary confinement. I opened the door and peeped out. The two tall men with white hair were standing in the hall.

Their uniforms were smarter than before, and had a great deal of gold braid upon them. Each footman had a big bunch of flowers stuck under his chin, and a long stick with a silver head in his hand. They might have been twins, they looked so like each other; but one giant had blue eyes, the other black.

“Where is Lady Dampier?” I asked.

“Her ladyship is a-dressing for the drawing-room,” answered the one nearest to me.

“Do ladies always change their frocks after breakfast?”

“Where was you raised, miss?” and both burst out laughing.

“What have I said to gi’ ye sae muckle amusement?” I asked rather huffily.

“What lingo do you speak, miss? ‘Sae muckle!’ that ain’t English,” said black eyes.

“I’m a Scotch lassie. I am trying to learn English, but it is unco’ hard.”

“ ‘Ard, do you call it ?” cried blue eyes.
“ Why, I call it heasy as nuffin.”

“ You were born in England,” I answered,
“ that makes all the differ. If you had
been born in the kennel, you would have
barked, would na ye ?”

“ Well, you are a queer lot, missie, and
no mistake !” remarked black eyes.

“ I dinna ken what ye mean. I am
naething but a puir Scotch lassie, and
never was in a toon till yesterday. I have
lived all my life in an old castle, papa’s
castle, in the middle of a great moor.”

“ That is why you are so green,” said
blue eyes.

“ Green !” I exclaimed. “ I never thocht
that my skin was green ; it is all pink and
white.”

“ So it is, miss ; you have a beautiful
complexion. I only meant that you was a
bit countrified. I thought every one knew
what a drawing-room was—her Majesty’s
drawing-room. My lady is going to
Court.”

“How should I know anything of what people do in London? I suppose Court has something to do with the Queen?”

“You are quite right, my dear,” answered the elder servant in black clothes, who had come up from the kitchen floor, and had listened with a kindly but amused smile to my conversation with the gaily dressed giants. “You are quite right. The great ladies go to Court at Buckingham Palace.”

“What do they do there?” I asked.

“They uncovers themselves as much as they dares, sticks some feathers in their 'eads, and claps on behind a many yards of silk or satin. They calls it a train; I calls it a tail. They drives off to the Palace, and waits about till her Majesty is ready to see them. They forms into line, and makes a bob to the Queen, one after the other as fast as they can, for all the world like a flock of sheep going under a gate. Then they goes away without a bite or a

sup. They calls that pleasure, they does ! I likes victuals when I goes to a party. Don't you, missie ? ”

“ I have niver been to a party. But I am sure that I would rather see the Queen than eat the biggest cake i' the land.”

“ Now, would you, miss ? Well, to be sure, I can't understand you gentlefolks. It certainly doesn't take much to amuse you.”

At that moment I heard a rustle on the stairs, and, looking up, I saw my grandmother. She was dressed in a magnificent robe of grey satin and black velvet. Instead of a cap, she wore a crown of diamonds, from which a plume of white feathers fell gracefully on her bare shoulders. Diamonds sparkled round her neck, and blazed all down the front of her bodice. She looked much younger without her cap, and her shoulders and arms were quite plump. In her hand she carried a large

posy of yellow roses. There was a smile of satisfaction on her comely face, which changed into a scowl the moment her eyes fell on me.

“Who told you to come out of the library?” she asked.

“I was just tired of being alone, grandmamma—I mean Lady Dampier. I thought you had forgotten all about me.”

“I wish I could forget you,” I thought I heard her mutter.—“Thompson,” she said, speaking to the servant in plain clothes, “you have my instructions with regard to the child.”

“Yes, my lady. I am to take Miss Dampier to the waiting-room at Waterloo Station, main down-line, and hand her over to a lady.”

“Her name?”

“Mrs. Annesley.”

“Quite right. Give the child some lunch, and don’t be late.” And then to me, “You will obey Mrs. Annesley, and not be

naughty, as you were in Scotland. Good-bye."

"Won't you kiss me before you go, grandmamma?" I asked, running forward at the same time.

"Don't touch me!" she cried. "You will spoil my dress;" and she tripped daintily out of the house into the carriage. The two footmen jumped up behind, and my grandmother drove off without giving a glance at me, as I stood on the door-step.

"Poor little woman!" said Mr. Thompson, as he slammed the door. "You shall have a nice luncheon, and then I will take you to Waterloo."

He went off, and soon returned with a tray covered with good things.

"I have brought you something besides your dinner. I thought you would eat with better relish if you had your dog for company;" and he called a stable-boy to bring in Rannock.

“ You dear good man ! ” I cried. “ For why are ye sae kind to me ? ”

“ I have a little daughter, just about your age, missie.”

“ You love her, and are good to me for her sake ? ”

“ I love my Alice dearly. She is that pretty, and good too ; but not so pretty as you, miss. You are a real beauty.”

“ My father does not love me,” I sighed. “ I envy your lassie.”

“ May I be bold to ask who is the father who does not love such a sweet little maid as you ? ”

“ Dinna ye ken that your maister is my father ? ”

“ Sir Lionel ? ”

“ Yes ; and Lady Dampier is my grandmother.”

“ Whoo ! that’s the time of day, is it ? ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Nothing, miss. I was only expressing my surprise. I didn’t think her ladyship was over civil to you.”

“She has been very rude and cruel. She hates me. Oh, for why do they all hate me?”

“Perhaps because you are too good for them,” he answered evasively. “Well, miss, I should be sorry if my little Alice had such a grandmother as yourn, though she is a lady of title. I’ll be bound her Majesty thinks there is not a nicer old lady at her drawing-room to-day. She does not know her ladyship as we do, does she, miss?”

“I dinna think grand people have any hearts,” I sighed; “only common people and dogs.”

We drove off to the station, Rannock running by the side of the cab, as I thought he required exercise. I kept my eyes on him, for fear he might lose us in the crowd.

The moment I entered the waiting-room, a lady came forward and asked if I was not Miss Dampier. We shook hands, and

then she gave me a kiss. I knew at once we should be friends.

Mrs. Annesley was a tall spare woman, with a plain hard face, but pleasing voice. She was dressed simply in black. She looked as if her mourning was not only on her back, but in her heart. Her hair was prematurely grey, and her features were sorrow-lined. She took me kindly by the hand, and led me on to the platform, crowded with travellers and noisy with the “by-your-leaves” of the porters pushing trucks of luggage.

My friend the butler saw Rannock placed in a dog-box and my luggage labelled for Lyndhurst Road, and, touching his hat, wished me a good journey. I had a small brooch of Scotch pebbles at my throat, which I took off, and asked him to give his little daughter. He seemed very pleased, and when I offered him my hand, he pressed it kindly.

“If at any time,” he said, “a poor man

like me can be of service, do not forget to apply to Thomas Thompson. I am always to be heard of at the Green Man at Battersea, my brother's public."

"What's a public, Mr. Thompson?"

"A public-house, where they sell beer and spirits."

"I shall not forget your kind offer. I shall remember the Green Man at Battersea. Good-bye. Thank you so much for saving Rannock's life."

"Don't mention it, miss. Here's an empty carriage. You had better jump in, as the first bell has rung."

"I should have come up by an earlier train," said Mrs. Annesley, as soon as we had settled ourselves and were crossing the bridge over the Thames, "and have met you in Eaton Square; but dear Lady Dampier telegraphed that she was going to the drawing-room, and could not receive me. I was to meet you at the station instead."

“ You are fond of grandmamma ? ”

“ I should be very ungrateful if I was not. She proved herself a true friend during my husband’s last illness and my early widowhood. She is a kind Christian lady.”

“ Do Christians hate their grandchildren ? ”

“ What a strange question ! ” remarked Mrs. Annesley, rather confusedly, I thought.

“ She jist hates me. She was sae unkind to me, and wanted to kill my doggie. She may have been good to you, but she was very bad to me. I hope I may never see her again. She is a wicked woman ! ”

“ I cannot allow you to speak of Lady Dampier in that way, Nellie, if we are to be friends.”

“ If grandmamma or papa and mamma loved me, do you think they would have left me with servants ever since I was a baby, without coming once to see me ? And now they are sending me off again to live with strangers. I don’t mind going

with you, for I like you, and mean to love you, if you will let me."

"That I will, my child;" and she kissed me tenderly.

"Do you know that grandmamma would not let me kiss her? She drove me away twice. She hates me, and I think by your face ye ken it weel."

"You must not be so sensitive, my dear. They may have some good reason for not wishing to bring you up at home. You would be very lonely without young companions."

"I had none at Craigie Castle."

"Well, Nellie, you will have one in the New Forest."

"You have a little lassie? Oh, that will be nice!"

"No, I have not; but I have a boy, a big boy of thirteen."

"He will not care to play with a lassie," I said sorrowfully.

"That he will. He is delighted at the

idea of having a little sister to amuse and make much of."

"How kind of him! I have never had a game of play in all my life, except with Rannock."

"Who is Rannock?"

"My dog, my dear old doggie. You won't want to poison him?"

"No indeed. My boy loves dogs. So you have never had a romp with other children? That is the reason why you are so old-fashioned."

"Old-fashioned? What does that mean?"

"You talk, and I expect think, more like a grown-up person than children of your age. We must make a child of you, and get rid of some of that Scotch accent."

"Do I speak very Scotchy? I can talk a little Gaelic too."

"You are very Scotch. I like a slight accent, but yours is too strong. You won't mind Bertie laughing at you a little at first?"

“Not a bit. But I dinna speak half as Scotchy as I did. Sister Lucy was always correcting me.”

“There is plenty of room for improvement still, Nellie; but Bertie and I will soon teach you English.”

“Bertie is your boy’s name? It is short for Albert, is it not?”

“No. Bertie’s real name is Herbert.”

“Am I to call him Bertie, or Herbert, or Master Annesley?”

“Bertie, certainly.”

“And what am I to call you?”

“Bertie calls me mammie, and you can call me the same. I want you to be just like brother and sister, and I mean to be a mother to you, Nellie, as well as to my Bertie.”

“I love you already, mammie,” I cried, jumping up and throwing my arms round her neck. “My ain people jist hate me; but God is very good to gi’ me others to love me in their place—Nannie, Sister Lucy, and you.”

Before we had got over half our journey, I felt as if I had known Mrs. Annesley for years. Having the carriage to ourselves, we were able to talk without restraint, and we soon knew a good deal of each other's histories.

Mrs. Annesley was the widow of a clergyman, who had been curate at a church not far from Eaton Square, where my grandmother pretended to worship. She certainly had been very kind to the Annesleys, and I only hope this charity covered a multitude of sins.

I told Mrs. Annesley how I had loved my Nannie, and how I had been indirectly the cause of her death. I told her the story of the ghost of Craigie Castle, which I saw she did not believe. When I had finished my narration, she talked of her son. There never was such a boy as Bertie—so loving, so clever, so handsome, and so good. All the lines faded out of her face, and smiles sweetened her mouth,

as she spoke of his good qualities and laughed at his mischievous pranks. I no longer thought her plain or hard-featured.

At Lyndhurst Road Station we found Bertie Annesley, waiting with a small pony-carriage. He greeted me shyly, with a sunny smile, and went into raptures over Rannock. Boy and dog were friends at once, and the pretty forest pony whinnied with pleasure as Rannock jumped up to give him a canine caress.

We drove off at a brisk pace. I sat with my back to the pony on a little seat, and had ample opportunity of looking at Bertie, who held the reins. No wonder that Mrs. Annesley was proud of her son! His face was beautiful, almost faultless in form and outline. The features were, perhaps, a little too pronounced for a boy of his age. Dark brown hair, with a dash of auburn through it, curled crisply above a broad forehead. The eyes were large and intensely blue. The nose was slightly

aquiline, and a small mouth smiled round regular teeth. A strong chin completed an ideal face. But it was not the singular beauty of features that impressed me so much as the expression which bespoke a heart brimming with happiness, purity, and truth. I felt that I could trust such a brother, and love him too.

Bertie whistled gaily as we drove along, which his mother reminded him was not polite in the company of a young lady and a stranger. He looked at me archly, and whistled all the louder. I tried to whistle too, but could not purse up my mouth for laughter. We understood each other from that moment, Bertie and I. I knew he would make a faithful and pleasant companion, and I think he knew the same of me.

We were soon in the forest. The trees stretched out their green arms to welcome me, and waved me a whispering kiss. I had never seen such great trees before:

oaks with twisted branches like writhing snakes; beeches, whose spreading boughs resembled the skirts of ladies, dropping graceful curtsies; dark hollies prim with stand-off leaves, and silver birches tumbling in feathery cascades of spray and leaf. Here and there were hawthorns white with blossom, and clusters of sombre pines. A rippling brook ran in and out amongst the stems. The banks were a network of creeping roots, and brilliant with the tender green of sprouting mosses. The sunshine fell in chequered patches on young fern and heather, amongst which the blue-bells nodded, till the ground looked a dancing sea of azure waves.

It was a glorious sight for eyes that had never before gazed on woodland scenery. Rolling moors, with their limitless horizons, may be monotonously grand, but ever-changing forest aisles, leading to unknown sanctuaries of dreamy blue, appealed to my childish love of mystery with a fascination

never felt before. Rapt in admiration, I sat in silence, holding Mrs. Annesley's hand for sympathy. Bertie whistled softly on, and Rannock bounded joyously by the carriage side, only leaving the road now and then to chase a rabbit into the bracken.

A couple of miles of rustling forest brought us to a moor, rising gently on the left into a green eminence crowded with a clump of trees, which Bertie pointed out as Bolton's Bench. Beyond, rose the spire of Lyndhurst Church—Lyndhurst, primitive and picturesque, sweetest village in the south. We rattled up the rising street, and, passing under the steep churchyard and by the Queen's House, with its red-brick gables, were in the forest again. Through a twilight tunnel of overhanging trees we ascended the short steep hill to Emery Down, a little hamlet commanding sweeping views over the rhododendron covers of Minstead Manor to the distant

hills of north Hampshire. A mile further, we left the Ringwood Road, and followed a green forest track to the right, till we reached a ford and wooden foot-bridge across a little river. On the other side, upon a grassy knoll, stood an unpretending red-brick cottage, green with creeping plants. In front was a small garden plot, and on the side a paddock.

This was to be my home, and a very pleasant home it looked, though it was smaller than I expected, and very unlike the castle on the moor, where I had passed my childhood.

A tall, well-built man in brown corduroy coat and breeches came down to take the pony to the stable, whilst his wife, a pretty buxom woman, met us at the latchet gate, and led me by the hand into the cottage. In the little sitting-room she took off my hat and jacket, and, kissing me kindly, said, “Welcome, little maid, to the New Forest.”

“What a lovely child!” she added, looking up at Mrs. Annesley. I was so accustomed to being told of my beauty, that I should not have remarked it had I not caught Bertie’s eye. I could not help blushing, and smiling too. I felt glad that I was pretty. I had never cared for it before.

CHAPTER IX.

THE KEEPER'S COTTAGE.

“COME and see your room, Nellie,” said Mrs. Annesley; “and Mrs. Nutburn will get us tea as quickly as she can, for we are all as hungry as hunters. Plenty of eggs and bacon, Mrs. Nutburn, and some of our New Forest honey.”

The stairs were very narrow. On the landing were four small rooms — Mrs. Annesley’s to the right; mine to the left, looking on to the garden; two rooms behind belonging to Bertie, one being his mess-room, as his mother called it.

My room was as pretty as I could wish. A paper, bright with little pink rosebuds, covered the walls. The curtains of the

window and my bed were of rosebud chintz, very similar to the wall paper. A mahogany chest of drawers, a three-cornered washing-stand with a marble slab, and a dainty dressing-table, all muslin and pink calico, completed my furniture. There were several pictures round the room, chiefly water-colour drawings from the brush of Mrs. Annesley, who was a no mean artist. I could see the pains my "mammie" had taken to make my room cheerful and homelike.

"What a dear little room!" I exclaimed; "so different to the big room at Craigie, dark with tapestry. I shall fancy I am sleeping in a bower of roses;" and I sang a verse of that pretty old song, "There's a bower of roses by Bendermeer's stream," but I fear in a very strange and unintelligible accent.

"Why, Nellie, you are quite a finished singer. What a full clear voice you have for your age!"

“ I am very fond of singing. I could sing tunes when I was three years old ; it is my one accomplishment.”

“ We must teach you some more. I am to be your governess as well as mammie. I am glad you like your tiny room. I have tried to make it bright for my new daughter.”

“ You have just succeeded, mammie. I am sure I shall be very happy here. There are no ghosts, are there ? ”

“ We know nothing of such things in these parts, whatever you may do over the Border.”

“ Ye dinna believe in ghosts ? ”

“ No, I don’t, Nellie.”

“ You would if you had lived at Craigie Castle.”

“ You must forget all about Craigie, and begin a new life in our beautiful forest. There ! Bertie is calling us to tea. Come along.”

The smell and sound of frizzling rashers

was most appetizing. I ran downstairs more than ready for my evening meal.

Bertie had whistled away all his shyness. We chattered together like sparrows in a hedge. He began at once to talk of forest life, and what a delightful life it was. I listened with interest to his account of the animals he met in his rambles and the flowers he picked. He showed me a viper he had tracked that morning by its trail through the sand till he scotched it basking in the sun in a corner of a sandpit. He touched it, and it moved. I started with fright, and could hardly believe that it had been dead for several hours, and that snakes retained a muscular movement long after death.

It was not an appetizing sight, but I was so hungry that it did not prevent my enjoying a hearty meal. Mrs. Annesley made me feel at home at once, and Bertie kept me laughing at his jokes, which were mostly at his mother's expense, who, how-

ever, joined in the laugh, even when it was against herself.

“The mum loves snakes,” cried Bertie, picking up the viper and pretending to throw it at her. “Don’t you, mammie?”

“Take the nasty thing away, Bertie. You know it makes me creep.”

“I thought the serpent might beguile you, mammie, like it did grandmamma Eve.”

“Not even if it brought me a golden-apple, you naughty boy! I shall have to punish you well, if you don’t throw it away.”

“I suppose you would like to Cain me. Are you sure you are Abel?” cried Bertie, roaring with laughter at the bad joke.

His mother could not help joining in his laughter. I was convulsed.

“I really wish, dear boy,” said Mrs. Annesley, “you would not bring any more of those nasty creatures into the house. Your room is full of snakes.”

“Fu’ o’ snakes!” I exclaimed.

“Yes. I have twenty-three different kinds.”

“Alive?” I asked in horror.

“They are in very good spirits, I assure you,” laughed Bertie Annesley.

“What does he mean, Mrs. Annesley? Surely they canna be alive? I shall jist be afraid o’ gangin’ upstairs gin they are.”

“The snakes are all dead, dear—preserved in bottles. Bertie is only making fun of you,” said his mother.

“Didn’t I get a rise out of Nellie, that’s all!” he cried.

It was the first time he had called me by my Christian name, and I was thinking how pleasant it was to have a brother like Bertie, when I saw two bright eyes peeping round the toast-rack. I jumped up, letting my bread fall on the ground, honey downwards.

“What’s the row?” cried Bertie.

“There’s a beastie on the table.”

“It is only a dormouse. It won’t eat you. I’ll run and fetch a hedgehog.”

“Not now, Bertie. We don’t want the tea-table turned into a museum of natural history.”

But Bertie was gone. He soon returned with something concealed under his napkin. It struggled and squeaked.

“I did not know that hedgehogs made such a noise,” I remarked.

“Hedgepigs do ;” and he dropped a little black porker on his mother’s lap.

“Really, Bertie, you are too bad ! My best dress too !”

But neither she nor I could help laughing as the little blackamoor ran out of the room, nearly upsetting Mrs. Nutburn, who was entering with a fresh relay of eggs and bacon.

“At your tricks again, Master Bertie !” she cried. “You’re as full of scampishness as a maggot of cheese. I won’t have pigs brought into the house.”

“Won’t you?” And Bertie disappeared, to return in a minute driving the rest of the litter before him. “Won’t you, Mrs. Nutburn?”

“I’ll tie a dish-clout to your tail, you naughty young varmint!” shrieked Mrs. Nutburn, in a rage.

“First catch my tail!”

“Tail or no tail, you’re a cheeky young monkey, that’s what you are, Master Bertie!”

This episode over, and tea also, we crossed over into the little drawing-room. I could not conceal my amusement, which was increased by the look of affected resignation on Mrs. Annesley’s face. She wanted to be shocked, but she was only proud of her son’s pranks.

Bertie politely offered me a seat, which I accepted. I jumped up with a squeal. I had sat down upon the hedgehog.

Mrs. Annesley, thinking that we had had enough of Master Bertie’s tricks, made

him sit down at her feet, and hold a skein of wool for winding. This sobered him, and we talked rationally till bedtime. Mrs. Annesley accompanied me to my room, and, as soon as the door was closed, we heard Bertie's voice outside, shouting—

“Pickled snakes! hot pickled snakes! Nice fresh vipers! Boa constrictors! all alive, ho!”

“He is showing off to-night,” said his mother, with a smile. “It is always the way with boys. He won’t be so silly to-morrow.”

Next morning I was up with the lark, and out in the garden. How balmy was the breeze! how fragrant the earth, just moistened by a shower! Raindrops flashed upon leaf and flower, as the sun rose in the eastern sky. The air was musical with the songs of birds, many of whose notes were unknown to me. Nature was in one of her loveliest moods, fresh and sweet, like some young girl whose cheeks

are wet with happy tears at finding herself so fair.

I leaned upon the wicket gate, and looked out into the forest. There was spring sunshine in my heart. I felt a bliss in breathing. Tears came into my eyes—tears I could not refrain or explain.

“What are you blubbering about, Nellie?” cried a voice behind me.

“Everything is so beautiful. I feel too happy.”

“I suppose you laugh when you are miserable? What rum creatures girls are!”

I was soon all smiles. Bertie was quite different to-day. He had slept off his nonsensical mood. He began to talk of his forest experiences, which interested me immensely, lover of nature as I had always been. He pointed out a fox sneaking home, after a surfeit of young rabbits; a squirrel in a pine tree, picking a cone to pieces to get at the seeds for his break-

fast ; a hawk sailing in the sky. He took me down the stream, where we heard the splash of a water-rat, and saw a heron fishing for minnows.

I found it difficult at first to focus my eyes to the narrow horizon. They had been accustomed to roam over the boundless moors, whose charm was in their vastness. Now Nature spread her loveliness lavishly before me ; but it was a concentrated loveliness, and the smallest leaf and the tiniest flower seemed to have a world of beauty in themselves. My heart was full of thankfulness to the Creator. I had never before realized the full meaning of, “He found that it was very good.”

I could hardly tear myself away from the beautiful scene when called in to breakfast. Such a scene as it was ! The beeches, in their fresh young green, contrasting with the darker foliage of pine and holly ; the clear stream widening out

into the shallow ford, then pulling itself together again between steep mossy banks, down which the tree-roots crept to find the water; the cows lowing, the birds singing. All was lovely. It was morning. It was Maytime. No wonder I forgot my sorrows!

At breakfast, Bertie asked me to collect the crumbs, as he did. He made a great many on the sly. We carried our stores into the garden. Bertie bade me hide behind a bay tree, as the birds might be shy of a stranger; and then whistled, with a low, sweet, gurgling noise.

I obeyed, and in a minute or two the birds came down in numbers. Most of them were new to me. There were dear little tomtits, all blue and yellow; thrushes; blackbirds; a pair of jays, with bars of pale blue upon their wings; a green woodpecker, with a red head; and some voracious little birds, who carried off the largest morsels—nut-hatches, Bertie called

them. There were several robins, who were pugnaciously inclined, and took care that they filled their red waistcoats without interference from other birds. If "we have the poor always with us," we certainly have the sparrows. These winged paupers came in flocks, and devoured their morning meal with the appetite of casuals.

When the crumbs were finished, Bertie took me to see a tomtit's nest in a holly bush; and gave me my first lesson in climbing, by helping me up the ivy-twisted bole of a hollow oak, where he had discovered a brood of young black-birds. How I laughed as they stretched out their necks, and opened yellow mouths, like animated eggs!

A run in the forest quite bewildered me with its sylvan glories. The spring sunshine flickered through the leaves, strewing the sward with variegated gems, as it chanced to light on primroses, wood anemones, or nodding bluebells. The

stream rippled melodiously over the pebbles, and played a running accompaniment to the love-song of the feathered choristers, resounding from tree and bush and brake.

I was happy—oh, so happy!—and my happiness was not diminished from being shared by a sympathetic companion. My heart was full of love—love of nature, and the God who made the earth so fair.

I loved Bertie too!

CHAPTER X.

FOREST DAYS.

DAKS grew imperceptibly into weeks, weeks into months, and a year had gone by before I had given a thought to the flight of time. I went to sleep at night pleasantly tired with work and exercise, and full of the ever-changing beauty of the woodland scenery round me, to wake each morning to new delights.

I had seen the New Forest in all the glamour of springtime, when flower and foliage danced in the gaiety of early growth; when there was not a speck on the petals of the wood-sorrel, or a brown leaf upon the beech or birch; when the

trees were full of song-birds, warbling to their mates as they sat upon their eggs, or kept their fledglings warm under the down of outstretched wings; when forest paths were gay with celandine and cuckoo flower, and sweet with the breath of violet and primrose, and cold, clay lands were ablaze with burning daffodils.

Later, I had seen the hawthorn and the sloe don their bridal veils, and the wild apples blush with blossom. I had seen spring ripen into the full beauty of the glorious summer glow, when the leafage had grown so thick that it was ever twilight under the spreading branches of the oaks and beeches. Primroses no longer gleamed in floral constellations on the mossy banks of rivulets, or in the grass amongst the young oaks in the paled plantations. Bluebells had ceased to shake out their whispering chimes with the breezes for bell-ringers, and wind flowers had vanished, like the snow they re-

sembled. Instead, the ground was golden with buttercup and crowfoot, bright with campion, white and pink, and the blue of speedwell and milkwort; orchis flowers purpled grazing-fields; foxgloves nodded by dyke and ditch, and banks of woodruff filled the woods with the scent of new-mown hay. In moist places, meadow-sweet waved white plumes, and the iris lifted golden spears, and cotton-grass and yellow asphodels were a warning not to trust the marsh-lands where they grew. Dog-roses trailed over hedge and brake, and fought for vantage-ground with scented woodbine, but both united could not check the spread of traveller's joy. The birds had hushed their songs, but the air was murmurous with the wings of countless insects. Butterflies, like fluttering flowers, danced in the sunbeams, and dragon-flies hovered over shady pools. It was a glorious time for me, who had never seen an English summer. The scene was so different to the

wild moors of my northern home, of which there was nothing to remind me but the purple heather, which bloomed wherever there was a clearing in the forest.

But, glorious as was summer, autumn struck me, perhaps, with more admiration still, when the trees turned red and golden at the first touch of frost. The foliage of the forest, which had become monotonously green, burst into a short-lived splendour. Viewed from a hill-top, the country resembled a sunset sea, wave rolling after wave in an infinite variety of colour—crimson, scarlet, golden, amber—broken here and there by islands of blue-green firs. Nearer, the trees looked like golden cascades, as the leaves fell in Danæ showers, shaken by the autumn wind. Flowers there were few, but the berries were almost as beautiful. On the ground, butcher's-broom was bright with crimson fruit; bushes were hung with trails of briony jewelled with ruby balls; and as for black-

berries, they were as thick as stars in the Milky Way. There were barberries in some of the plantations, and later in the season the leafless rods of spindle-wood carried pendulous coral berries, which, bursting, showed their amber seeds. Yes, autumn in the forest is a glorious time. Nature puts on her coat of many colours before she hides herself in her winter winding-sheet.

I had seen the forest in winter, too, when the ground was deep with crackling leaves, and the bracken was shrivelled crisp and brown ; when the trees stretched out weird arms to the cold sky, and their grey trunks stood up like rows of ghostly giants. Sweet as was the spring, beautiful as the summer, and glorious as the golden autumn, I am not sure that winter was not the grandest of them all. The views were more extended, and there was a wild beauty in the articulation of every branch and spray, more fascinating in my eyes than when

they were clothed in greenery. The grace of drooping beeches and of weeping birches was never so manifest, nor the weirdness of the oak's contortions. Lichens and mosses were not able before to display their fantastic growths, covering the branches with grey fringes or coral-shaped excrescences, and the ground with richer velvet than could be produced in any earthly loom. Each season had its own special beauties, and the last always seemed to me to bear away the palm.

I had become a thorough forest maiden, and had caught the passion for the forest, which never cools. At first I used to lose myself in the green labyrinth as soon as I was out of sight of the cottage. I never dared to venture on a solitary walk—not that I had many opportunities for taking one—as Bertie was always ready to be my guide, and was seldom absent, except on the rare occasions on which he went into Southampton on his mother's

business, or started with our landlord on expeditions too long for a girl's feet. I soon learned, however, to steer by certain landmarks, and by the sun. Bertie always carried a compass, which he seldom or never used, and I never took the trouble to understand it. He knew the forest like a map, and as long as I had him for companion, there was no necessity for me to develop my bump of locality.

We walked together every day, and all the day we could steal from our lessons. We took a stroll before breakfast; after breakfast we studied till dinner-time, and studied hard, for Mrs. Annesley encouraged us to give our whole attention to our work. Bertie and I worked in different rooms; he in the dining-room, I in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Annesley went from one to the other. She had a wonderful power of imparting knowledge, being thorough mistress of what she taught. She not only was a proficient in English literature, and

French and German, but she was also a Greek and Latin scholar, and to these heavier subjects she added a no mean skill in music and painting. With my passion for music, I enjoyed my hours at the piano, whilst Bertie gave his best attention to his drawing lessons. He showed wonderful talent with his pencil, and when he took to the brush, he soon left his mother behind.

After our early dinner, we were wont to start for long forest rambles, in which Rannock always accompanied us, and often did not return till twilight told us that it was supper-time, and warned us to hurry home before darkness obliterated our landmarks. Mark Ash was not far off, and we explored it so thoroughly that there was not a track we had not followed, or a giant tree that we had not measured. The beeches of Mark Ash are the grandest in the forest, and their huge grey trunks seemed to me like the columns of a mighty

temple, of which the interlacing branches were the groinings of the leafy roof, and the pavement was of last year's leaves. Here Bertie often took his easel, and made charming pictures of forest scenery, in which I and Rannock generally figured in the foreground.

On one side of Mark Ash lay the enclosure of Bolderwood with its rare conifers, where Bertie pointed out the site of the old lodge and told me that he meant, when he was a rich man, to build a fine house. "Of course, you and mother will live with me," he said slyly; but it never struck me that I could hardly take up my abode under his roof except as his wife. Bertie thought of it even then; but boys are so different to girls. It never occurred to me that Bertie and I were not brother and sister—at least, not till some time later. On the other side of Mark Ash was Knightwood Plantation, where we visited the largest oak in the New Forest. The

tree has stood there for many centuries, and looks as if it would stand for as many more. Bertie made a sketch or two of the huge oak, but did not think it would make a good picture. With its main branches, extended in one plane, it looked like the palm of a giant's hand with outstretched fingers, or a monster octopus, and was more grand than graceful. From thence we sometimes crossed the Christchurch Road and roamed through the enclosure of Vinney Ridge to Rhinefield, the site of another demolished lodge, where I told Bertie that *I* should build my house, as the air was finer and the view more extensive.

One long summer day, when we had begged a holiday from our kind but strict schoolmistress, we took our dinner with us to Rhinefield, and ate it in my imaginary parlour. We afterwards ran down the hill to the Queen's Bower, a cluster of grand old beeches watered by a wide forest stream, which we followed through the

New Park enclosure to Brockenhurst, a forest village almost as sweet as Lyndhurst on the hill. The old Norman Church, approached on either side by a steep bowery lane, is unique in antiquity and picturesqueness. In the churchyard stands a gigantic yew, and the ivy-grown trunk of an oak, as old as the building, stands sentinel at the lych-gate.

Another favourite walk was through Puck Pitts to the breezy heights of Stony Cross, where we used to revel in the wide-views over forest and moor to the cliffs of Alum Bay and the Needle rocks. Beyond, we wandered down to Rufus's Stone, or rather the hideous iron post, which marks the spot where Red William fell, after visiting the Peeps of Castle Malwood, cuttings in the forest affording glorious vignette views of wood and plain and blue horizons, returning home by way of Minstead and Emery Down.

But it would be as wearisome to describe

a hundredth part of our delightful walks as impossible to give an idea of their varied beauty—hill and dale, moor and forest, every combination of woodland scenery, where the trees have grown at their own wild will for centuries, and have no rivals in all sylvan England.

The pleasant excursions of our happy trio were, however, soon to be interrupted. Mrs. Annesley thought, very wisely, that her son ought to have the advantage of the society of other boys, and the manly training of the playground. She knew that she had special qualification for educating him at home, and that the expense of a first-rate school was beyond her means. But at the very moment when she was feeling that Bertie required a man's hand over him and a higher education than she could give, all difficulties were removed by the offer of an uncle in India to pay his schooling. Bertie was too old to enter one of the great public schools, even if they had

been suitable for a boy who had to work for his living. A school at Bournemouth was highly recommended, and fixed on without delay. It had numerous advantages, of which not the least was its proximity to the New Forest. Mrs. Annesley thought that Bertie could easily be reached if he fell ill, whilst I hoped that we might sometimes meet on a holiday, by each walking half-way to a common rendezvous.

As the time for his departure approached, I was as depressed as his mother. Bertie's spirits rose as ours fell. He had a compensation for parting with us in the prospect of boy playfellows and games in the cricket-field, to say nothing of boating on the sea. There was no compensation for me. I was to be deprived of my companion. I must give up my daily forest walks, as I knew Mrs. Annesley could not allow me to wander far afield, even with Rannock's protection. I should have

no one near my own age to amuse me, or even to tease me ; no one with whom to exchange ideas, or to whom I could confide my childish troubles. Mrs. Annesley was kindness itself, but she was not exactly a cheerful companion for a young girl—at least, she was not a substitute for her merry and sympathetic son. What would become of me ? How could I exist without Bertie ? I was often on the verge of a good cry when Bertie's departure was discussed, but a feeling of maidenly pride kept the tears in check till he was out of the way. Many an evening I cried myself to sleep, thinking of my coming loneliness, and with the sad thought came longings for a father's and a mother's love, without which no childhood can be bright. I clung all the more to Bertie, who had made up to me in a great measure for the love that I had lost. But Bertie was going to leave me, and I feared without much regret. He could not care for me as I

cared for him! I believe I should have fretted myself ill had not an adventure averted my mind from the coming separation. It did more, indeed; it made me long for the arrival of the day when Bertie was to commence his school-life at Bournemouth.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CHILDREN OF THE NEW FOREST.

ALL young people delight in Captain Marryat's fascinating tale, "The Children of the New Forest." Bertie and I, who were children of the New Forest, naturally took a special interest in a story which reflected the life we led and described the woodland scenery we loved. The locality where the plot is laid has been disforested, and is therefore no longer recognizable. But our own surroundings were so like the descriptions of the parts where the orphans were in hiding from the Roundheads, that we had no difficulty in transferring their adventures to the neighbourhood of our home,

and acting, as we often did, their parts. We had read the book over and over again, till we almost knew it by heart. It was not only our amusement, but our instructor in woodcraft.

We had often talked of digging a pitfall for game, such as Edward Beverley had made—though we did not wish to catch a gipsy as he had done, being sure that such an addition to our family circle would not prove at all acceptable. We thought it would be fine fun to dig a big hole, and perhaps trap a fox or a badger.

It was my suggestion that we should carry out the long-contemplated idea before Bertie went to school. I felt that any occupation would help me to hide my sorrow, and be better than the restrained conversation I forced myself to keep up on our walks. Bertie had plenty to say about his coming life; mine seemed a blank.

No time was to be lost, as Bertie was

to leave home in a week ; so, having begged a whole holiday, we started immediately after breakfast, and picked up a spade and short ladder, which Bertie had hidden in some gorse bushes out of sight of the cottage. We were afraid of making our pitfall anywhere near home, lest it should be discovered by Job Nutburn in his daily rounds ; so we trudged three miles, till we found a quiet spot on the other side of Mark Ash, far from any frequented track.

Bertie soon marked out an oblong space, about the size of a sawpit, and began at once to dig a hole. The ground was hard, and the excavation was not nearly deep enough by the time we had to return to supper. We could not ask next day for another holiday, so operations had to be postponed till after dinner. We found that some animal had fallen into the hole, but had been able to jump out again. Bertie set to work with a will, and in a couple of hours his head was on a level

with the surface of the earth. The pit was deep enough.

I had spent my time in collecting long fallen branches, moss, and bracken, with which to form the covering of the trap. Bertie arranged these as naturally as he could, and at a little distance it was impossible to distinguish any difference in the surface of the ground. In the centre of the artificial soil he placed a heap of corn, which he had stolen from a bin in the stable.

Delighted with our work, we climbed up a neighbouring oak, and made ourselves as comfortable as we could in the fork of the tree. We sat in silence, watching our trap with intense excitement. A cock pheasant came out of the under-wood, and walked boldly up to the corn. The bird's weight had no effect upon the interwoven branches, and he was enjoying a hearty meal when a fox peeped slyly out of the bracken. I almost fell from

my perch, craning to see what would become of the poor bird. I wanted to throw a piece of stick to frighten off the fox, but Bertie stopped me. The fox crept stealthily forward, and, with a spring, caught the pheasant in its mouth. One of its forelegs went through the moss, but it kept hold of the fluttering bird, and, after a struggle, was able to gain firm ground. The fox was saved, but the pheasant lost.

An hour passed, and nothing came our way. A few birds pecked the grain, a woodpecker and magpie the largest.

“They will eat all the corn,” I whispered.

“Hush! I hear something. It must be a big animal by the sound of the feet.”

“I hope it is not a forest pony.”

“There are more animals than one.”

“Ponies always go about three or four together.”

“The steps are too light for ponies, I think. If they are ponies, I will jump

down and frighten them off. Hush! they are getting quite close. What's that above the holly bushes? Antlers! By Jove! it's a stag. *We are in luck!*"

In another minute a splendid stag appeared in sight, and walked statelily down the glade, followed by a couple of hinds. My heart was in my mouth. I clutched Bertie's arm. The stag walked nearly up to the pitfall and stood still, eyeing the grain. It bounded forward. The fore legs went through the branches, which cracked and gave way beneath the weight of the body that followed them. The animal made a frantic struggle to save itself, but only widened the breach, and then went down with a dull crash into the pit below. We had caught a prize, one of the last of the beautiful red deer, which were formerly the pride of the New Forest.

Wild with excitement at our success, we scrambled down from our oak, and ran towards the pit. The hinds trotted off in

alarm. We looked down at our quarry, and our delight at the capture of such a noble beast was greatly modified when we saw how badly it was hurt. The right leg was broken ; the bone was protruding through the skin. The poor brute looked up at us with terrified but appealing eyes. It made an effort to rise, and then fell panting and helpless on its side. It was a sickening sight. I could not bear to witness such suffering, and to know it was all my fault.

“ Oh, Bertie ! ” I cried, with tears streaming from my eyes, “ what can we do to ease its pain ? ”

“ Don’t be a fool, Nellie ! Crying won’t mend the stag’s leg.”

“ I wish we had never set the trap.”

“ And so do I. We have got ourselves into a pretty mess. It never came into my mind that we might catch a deer.”

“ How into a mess ? You wanted to take some game ; the bigger the game, the

more I should have thought you would have been pleased."

"Game! that's just it, Nellie. Do you not know what killing game without a licence means? It never struck me until I saw the deer bleeding there that we are poaching. If we are caught, we shall have to go before the magistrates at Lyndhurst."

"Let us run away. Come, Bertie; come at once."

"And leave the poor brute to die in agony?"

"It must die, whether we go or stay. We must not be caught. What would your mother say if we were sent to prison? Come along!"

"No, Nellie. I must put the stag out of its misery."

"Will you bury it?"

"Alive, Nellie? That would indeed be cruel. It must be killed first."

"Who will kill it?"

“I must. It is a dreadful business, but it has to be done.”

“Oh, Bertie, you can’t! you can’t! besides, it will be very dangerous. The stag is sure to butt at you with its antlers, if you go down into the hole.”

“I must run the risk.”

“Let me go home and fetch Job; he is accustomed to such work.”

“Job is a keeper, and it would be his duty to arrest us for poaching. No; I must kill the stag myself. I have left my knife at home. Have you got one, Nellie?”

“It is only a penknife,” I answered, giving him my mother-of-pearl handled knife.

“It must do,” he said, as he bound it with some string to a stick. “Now, run away, there’s a dear girl!”

“I will never leave you, Bertie. It is I who have brought you into this trouble.”

“Never mind whose idea it was to dig

the pit. I am older than you, and ought to have been wiser. Do run home, and I will catch you up in a few minutes."

"It is no use asking me, Bertie; we will go away together."

"Then stand over there by the oak till I have finished the business;" and Bertie shivered at the thought.

I threw my arms round his neck, and implored him for his mother's sake, for my sake, not to risk his life; but I knew by the determined look about his mouth that my prayers were vain. He gave me one loving kiss, the first he had ever given me, and pushed me aside.

He took the ladder, and lowered it into the hole. I could look at him no longer. I threw myself on the ground, and hid my face in my hands, putting the thumbs over my ears that I might not hear the struggle.

I loved Bertie with a love past telling. I had no one else to love. He was father,

mother, brothers, and sisters, everything to me, and he was now, perhaps, going to his death! My heart beat so wildly that I thought it must break. Oh, the agony of those minutes of suspense! I could not remain deaf; I must hear what was going on. Bertie might be calling me, might want to say a last good-bye. I listened. There was silence deep as death; then a terrible commotion, and silence again. I dared not look up. Either Bertie or the stag was dead. Which was it?"

"Nellie!" cried a voice from the pit. I knew that he was safe, and that his work was done. I jumped up, and saw Bertie's head coming above the ground. He was fearfully pale and almost fainting as he stepped upon the grass. I ran towards him, and was going to throw my arms round him.

"Don't touch me," he cried. "I am covered with blood. Oh, Nellie, it was a dreadful job!" and he passed a hand across

his eyes, as if to brush away the sight. It left a red stain behind.

“Come to the stream, and let me wash the blood off !” I cried.

We ran down together to a little rivulet. I soaked my handkerchief, and used it as a sponge. Time after time I rinsed the blood out of it. I wonder I did not faint, but my joy at having Bertie safe kept me up.

“That’s enough, Nellie,” he said. “Let us go home.”

“And leave the stag behind !” I exclaimed.

“I am not up to more work to-day. I will fill up the hole to-morrow; I shall not feel so queer then. Come along, Nellie.”

“I hope no one will pass this way.”

“I do not think any one is likely to do so; the place is far from any of the beaten tracks; but we must chance it.”

I took Bertie’s hand, and we started

homewards. We did not speak; we were both upset. I was crying quietly.

“We have left the spade and ladder behind!” cried Bertie, suddenly, when we were more than half-way home. “I must go back and fetch them; they would be conclusive evidence against us, if found on the spot.”

Bertie wanted me to go home without him, but I was resolved not to leave him. We were partners in this unpremeditated crime, and must sink or swim together. It seemed a weary walk, for our feet were as heavy as our hearts. I shook all over as we approached the pit, and Bertie’s hand trembled in mine. I turned my head away as we passed it. Bertie looked in. He dropped my hand.

“The stag is gone!” he cried.

I looked into the hole. The sandy ground was red with blood, but the deer was not there.

“The keepers have carried it off,” con-

tinued Bertie. "If they have found the spade and ladder, we are done for."

I ran to the place where I had last seen them lying. To our great relief they were there. So far we were safe! Bertie insisted on shouldering both, and we started a second time for home.

It was late. The sun had set before we approached the cottage. Mrs. Annesley was at the gate, evidently looking anxiously for us. We waited till she went back into the house, and, after hiding spade and ladder in a thicket, we crept round by the orchard and slipped in by the back door. Bertie reached his room unobserved. I stumbled on the stairs. Mrs. Annesley heard the noise, and came out of the little sitting-room.

"How late you are, Nellie!" she said. "It is long past supper-time. You really must not stay out again to this hour. Where is Bertie?"

"Gone up to his room," I answered.

“Has he hurt himself?”

“Oh no; he is all right.”

“I never knew him come in so quietly; he generally makes such a clatter. You look ill, child. Is anything the matter?”

“I am quite well, thank you, mammie, but very tired;” and I burst into tears.

“Poor dear! I must really tell Bertie that you are not able to walk so far as a great strong boy.”

“I shall not have him long to walk with.”

“So you thought you would take two walks in one to-day. There, run upstairs and get ready for supper;” and she kissed me like a mother. She knew I loved her son.

At supper, Bertie talked twenty to the dozen. He overacted his unconcern, and was in a great state of excitement, though his mother did not seem to notice it. He scarcely touched food, but drank glass after glass of water. A lump in my

throat prevented my swallowing; but, somehow, Mrs. Annesley did not observe what poor suppers we made. I was glad to plead fatigue as an excuse for retiring early.

Once alone, I broke down; my nerves were thoroughly unstrung. I had suffered more than words can tell during those anxious minutes, when Bertie was in danger, and now everything looked black in front of me. Bertie was going away, and I should have to bear the fear of detection alone, and perhaps the punishment for poaching. But I was more glad than sorry for this; if Bertie escaped, I should be content to suffer. After weary waking hours, I managed at last to sleep, but only to dream of bleeding stags and black dungeons.

Mrs. Annesley, finding that I did not come down at my usual hour, brought breakfast to my bedside, and insisted on my not rising till noon. Bertie did not

appear at dinner, which made his mother as nervous as myself. Could he have run away to escape observation ? and then I blushed at having harboured such a thought. He was too brave, too chivalrous, to fly and leave me to meet a charge of crime in which he had participated.

I walked out after dinner, and mechanically turned my steps towards the bushes where Bertie had hidden the ladder and spade. The ladder was there, not the spade. He had gone to fill up the pit. Why had I not thought of that before ? If the keepers had carried off the stag, would they not watch for the poachers, who might be expected to return for their game ? It was foolish of Bertie to have gone back to the spot. Perhaps he was now under arrest, and on his way to the lock-up at Lyndhurst. The ground of my anxiety was changed for the worse.

I sat down on the roots of a great oak, and waited, I scarcely knew what for. If

Bertie was taken to prison, it would break his mother's proud heart, and mine too. I was conjuring up all sorts of troubles, when I heard a step on the crackling leaves and a melancholy whistle. It was Bertie with the spade. I ran to meet him, relieved of a great fear.

He had filled up the pit; no one had seen him.

“Cheer up, little one,” he cried. “Don’t look so down in the mouth. I begin to hope that we shall hear no more of the matter. By the footprints round the pit there must have been several men, and at least one boy, engaged in carrying off the deer. They could not have been keepers, or we should have heard of it from Job Nutburn. Come, cheer up, Nellie. Remember, I am off to school to-morrow.”

Though the thought of his departure was not exhilarating, I did pick up my spirits, and my appetite. We both were ravenous at supper. It was our last even-

ing together; but my sorrow at parting with my dear companion was greatly mitigated by the desire to see him safely out of the way of keepers and policemen. I bustled about and helped Mrs. Annesley to put the last finish to his packing. Her eyes were moist, mine were dry. I would have expedited his departure instead of retarding it. I was all for his catching an early train, his mother for a late one.

I was so weary from my last bad night that I never turned in my bed till cockcrow. I had promised to take a parting stroll with Bertie before an early breakfast. I heard him whistling his usual call, and, after dressing hurriedly, ran down to join him in the garden. I was pleased to hear that he had returned the spade and ladder to their usual places without being observed.

Never was there a more glorious August morning. The air was sweet and pure. The rising sun was lighting up the dew-

drops on blade and leaf and flower. The forest looked its loveliest, and the fantastic forms of the old trees looked more mysterious than ever, viewed through the veil of morning mist. My heart for a moment forgot its trouble, and soared with the rising lark. But it soon fluttered down again to earth and its fears.

Bertie refused to talk of our adventure, and advised me to forget it, as he intended to do. For the first time he adverted to our coming separation; he talked of the happy forest days we had passed together, and how he should count the weeks till the holidays sent him home again. He made me promise to write constantly, and, after placing a little Mizpah ring upon my finger, gave me a tender kiss, and led me weeping back to the cottage. There was no love-making about it. We were only a boy and girl, a brother and sister; but I looked on the ring as a bond of union which only death could break. I was his

and he was mine for ever and for ever. “The Lord watch between thee and me when we are absent one from another” was the prayer in my heart, as it was upon the ring.

At last the hour of parting came. The pony-trap was at the door. Bertie would soon be safe away from suspicion and detection. I left him with his mother, and ran down to give the pony a lump of sugar. Mrs. Nutburn was at the gate, with a huge cake for the troublesome brat, whom she loved the more she scolded him. Bertie came down the garden path wiping his eyes. Mrs. Annesley was weeping. Mrs. Nutburn was laughing with one eye and crying with the other. My cheeks were red with excitement, but my eyes were tearless.

“It is too bad of you leaving us, Master Bertie,” said Job Nutburn, who was holding the pony’s head, “just as we was wanting you.”

“What for, Job?”

“To help in catching these blackguard poachers. They’ve been at it again. Blake found the head of a fine stag hidden in some bushes near the Knightwood enclosure; he has just been here to tell me. I must get back as fast as I can to meet the other keepers. We don’t mean to let the rascals off this time!”

Bertie and I exchanged glances; all my anxiety revived. I felt quite faint, and seized Mrs. Annesley’s arm for support.

The pony started off. Bertie was gone; and, oh! how glad I was!

CHAPTER XII.

A CANINE DETECTIVE.

THE days were very long without my companion. I took Rannock for a run every day, but never ventured far from home. I paid double attention to my lessons, especially to my music, my love for which was becoming a passion. I found the piano understood me and spoke to me of the absent one. My heart was full of Bertie, and there was more music in my fingers and in my heart when I thought of him. Mrs. Annesley was astonished at my increased powers of execution and expression, and evidently took much of the credit to herself. It was the son, not

the mother, who was the cause of my progress.

A fortnight passed, and no clue had been found to elucidate the mystery of the slaughtered deer. Without asking many questions, I gathered all I could as to the proceedings of the keepers. I wished to appear as unconcerned as possible, and only to take an interest in the matter so far as it affected the acuteness of Job Nutburn and his colleagues as detectives. I learned that they had discovered the site of our pitfall, and were mightily puzzled at the footprints and the traces of blood round the lately broken ground. They were inclined to connect it in some way with the killing of the stag, but had not the slightest suspicion that a pitfall had been dug. I began to hope that the mystery would not be solved, as the venison had probably by this time been consumed.

As my fears of detection became less, I felt amused at the baffled efforts of the

keepers. I laughed to myself when I thought that Job had one of the poachers under his own roof, and that if he only looked over my shoulders when I was writing to Bertie, he would read of my complicity. I became over-confident, and twitted Job on his want of sagacity. I offered myself as an amateur detective, and had the audacity one morning to propose accompanying him in that capacity. I longed for exercise, and was so wrapped in false security that I felt I could thoroughly enjoy a walk in the forest. Mrs. Annesley was delighted to see me in better spirits, and encouraged me to take Rannock a long run under Job's protection.

We started immediately after breakfast. Rannock seemed to share my recovered cheerfulness, and raced over the springy turf as he had not done since Bertie went to school. I was afraid that our path might have led us past the scene of our disastrous adventure. I had no wish to

see the place again, certainly not in the company of a keeper, who would expect me to investigate the marks in the soil, and offer an opinion as to their significance. I was afraid that I should not be able to conceal my confusion, and I made up my mind to invent an excuse for turning back, if Job took me in that direction. Fortunately, or rather unfortunately as it turned out, for Bertie and myself, Job had appointed to meet Blake at the Knightwood oak ; and our way, therefore, did not take us near the spot I wished to avoid. Free from nervousness on that score, I was able to chat cheerfully with my companion as I tried to keep pace with his long strides.

We came to an opening in the forest—a few acres of heather surrounded by a belt of beeches. I was tired with walking so fast, and begged Job to make his steps a little slower, which he did not seem to like. Rannock was careering about, now chasing a bird from bush to bush, now

following the scent of a rabbit. There were a quantity of burrows in the sandy soil, and the dog ran barking from one to another, disappointed at not catching sight of any of their inmates. Suddenly he stopped running about, and began to scratch away the earth with his paws. He had made quite a large hole by the time we came up with him; the deeper he got, the more excited he grew. I wanted to stop a minute to see what he was after; but Job was in a hurry, so I kept on pacing by his side. Rannock stayed behind. I called him in vain. At last he came bounding after us with something in his mouth. He laid a great bone at my feet.

“It is the hind leg of a deer,” cried Job in great excitement, as he took up the bone. “Here is a clue at last!”

For the first time in my life I was angry with Rannock. Job insisted on returning to Rannock’s excavation. He had no spade, but with the help of a stout stick and the

dog's paws he turned up several more well-picked bones. They had only recently been buried, as the meat that still adhered to them was quite fresh. Not far off were the cinders of a fire, and here and there a rag lay amongst the heather. Job picked up a buckle from an old harness, and a piece of halter.

"I always said it was those rascally gipsies," he said. "I've hit it at last."

"Don't take all the credit, Job!" I exclaimed with affected jocosity. "If there is a reward offered, it ought to be given to Rannock."

"Or to Rannock's mistress. If you had had not come with me to-day, we should never have found the poachers."

"How will you be able to find the right gipsies? There are so many about."

"There's not much difficulty about that. We can find out exactly what gangs have camped here since the deer was killed. They are only allowed to remain three-days in one place."

I held my tongue. I could say nothing to exculpate the gipsies without inculpating Bertie and myself. We were the real poachers, but the gipsies had clearly eaten the venison. They would be arrested, and, if they had seen us near the pit, would naturally try and throw suspicions upon us. My spirits fell below zero. I walked silently by Job's side, who whistled loudly to express his satisfaction. He kept stroking Rannock's head, and calling him "good dog." Rannock seemed to feel that he was in my bad books, and ran barking by my side to attract my notice; but I would not give him a look—troublesome meddler in other people's affairs! The poor dog was quite sad, and dropped behind, with his tail between his legs. The keeper saw that something was wrong with me, and asked if I was tired?

"Not a bit, thank you."

"Then, why are you so glum, miss?

You seem sorry that I have got my hand on these d——d poachers."

"I hope you won't catch them."

"You hope I shan't catch 'em! Well, I am blowed! I fancied you and me was on good terms, Miss Nellie. But them as is friends with gipsies and poachers can't be friends with the keeper too. It ain't nat'ral."

"I can wish them to escape punishment without being their friend, can't I?" I asked petulantly.

"I don't see as how you can. You must be for the law or against it. Them as breaks the law must take the consequences, that's all."

"I dare say their poor children were hungry, and they did not think there was much harm in taking some venison when it came in their way."

"Game does not go after poachers; poachers goes after game. You'll allow, Miss Nellie, that it is wrong to take what isn't yours?"

“Deer are wild animals, not like pigs and sheep.”

“Well, to be sure, who would have thought you were such a radical! What would Master Bertie say to such notions?”

“He would say that you are a very rude man to call me bad names,” I cried, working myself into a passion. “I’m not a radical, and I won’t be called a radical!”

“I beg your pardon, miss,” said Job, with a puzzled look. “I did not mean to offend you.”

“Gipsies have just as much right to the forest as you,” I went on, with flashing eyes.

“They has no right to the game.”

“Why don’t you get rid of them?” I asked. “There is not room in the forest for keepers and gipsies.”

“I wish we could,” replied Job, upon whom my satire was lost. “It is easier said than done.”

“You keepers might get up a party and

shoot them down. You would find it grand sport. What a bag you might make—men, women, and little children!"

"I should say as you was poking fun at me, Miss Nellie, if you didn't look so angry. I wish I knew what I had done to raise your dander. One would almost think you was a poacher yourself, by the way you stick up for them rascals."

"Perhaps I am, Job," I answered quietly.

It was very foolish of me to lose my temper so completely, and more foolish to quarrel with Job Nutburn, when I might want him as a friend before long. I was thoroughly put out with myself for being the cause of re-opening a matter which I had hoped was closed. If I had not presumed on a false security, I should not have offered to accompany Job as an amateur detective, and Rannock would not have recovered the lost scent. I was angry with myself, and vented my spleen

on my companion, who must have been very obtuse not to have looked deeper for the cause of my irritation. He had drawn a bow at a venture when he suggested that I might be a poacher myself, but he did not think that he had hit the mark. How should he? Was I not a young lady, and above suspicion?

We met Harry Blake at the appointed rendezvous. Job showed him the bones, which he had brought with him in his large red handkerchief, and the two held a consultation over them.

They decided on making a further search, and went off to the nearest habitation, the old turnpike on the Christchurch Road, where they borrowed a spade. Though I felt that I was assisting at my own possible incrimination, I followed them, led on by a sort of fascination, to the place where Rannock had discovered the bones. They dug up several more bones and the hide of a red deer. There were still some joints

missing, and these they expected to find in the gipsies' possession.

Job's friend said he could put his hand on the guilty parties at once ; he knew the gang well. They were as bad a lot as could be, every jack man of them a poacher. He had seen them leave the camp, where the bones were found, a week ago, and he knew that they had migrated to the other side of Lyndhurst, and were now somewhere near the Salisbury Road, a quarter of a mile beyond the kennels.

Job and his colleague returned the spade to its owner, and went on straight to Lyndhurst with the hide and bones. They wished to make immediate arrangements with the police for arresting the poachers that evening, when they would all be in camp, and probably regaling themselves on a venison stew.

If Job had not been angry with me, I think he would have seen me home first. I felt that I thoroughly deserved to be

ignored for my ill-advised and unladylike conduct, and trudged back to the cottage in a repentant mood, with my faithful but officious dog.

I thought of starting off at once to give the gipsies warning of the intended raid, but I knew it would only delay the men's apprehension if they moved on, and not save them from punishment. I was sure that there was ample proof to convict them of having eaten the venison, but I was not lawyer enough to know whether that alone was sufficient to convict them of poaching. I must find out the state of the law, as I was resolved that they should only be punished for what they had done—for eating, not for killing, the deer.

I could not sleep a wink all night. Before going to bed I had written to Bertie a full account of everything, including my insane ebullition of temper, and had left space to report what I heard from Job in the morning as to the capture of the gipsies. At

dawn of day I got up and dressed myself. I knelt long in prayer for guidance in the difficult position in which I was likely to be placed. I felt that Bertie and I had acted foolishly and thoughtlessly, but that God would help us, as our intentions had not been criminal. I rose from my knees perfectly resolved that if the gipsies were convicted for killing the stag, I would not let them suffer for the guilty. I would confess my share in the business and take the consequences.

I longed to see Job and ask his forgiveness for my ill-tempered rudeness, and also to learn what had been done with the gipsies. I had heard him come in very late, so did not expect him to rise as early as usual. My suspense was almost unendurable. I thought I should breathe more freely out of doors, and was in the garden before five o'clock. An hour later Job appeared at the door. I ran to meet him.

“We have got your friends under lock

and key," he cried, surlily but triumphantly. "They won't kill any more deer for another six months, at least. Their children will have to get on without venison for supper."

"Why for six months?" I asked.

"Because the magistrates will give them six months."

"Six months in prison!" I gasped, thinking what might be in store for myself.

"A light punishment, too, for killing such a beautiful deer."

"But suppose they didn't kill it, Job!"

"Not kill it, miss! Excuse me, but you are talking nonsense. They must have killed it before they ate it."

"They might have found the stag dead."

"Very likely! Twenty years as I've been keeper I never seed a dead deer. But, giving them the benefit of the doubt, they ate the venison, and that's six months."

"Can you prove they ate it?"

"We caught 'em in the very act. Me

and Harry Blake with four peelers went after dark to the camp, and there we found your fine friends at supper. My goody, didn't the stew smell savoury! It was venison, and no mistake."

"I don't see how you could tell it was a part of the very stag whose head was found near Knightswood."

"It was enough that they were eating venison. But we had more proof behind. We found a couple of joints, two of the missing joints, hanging in one of the caravans. No, Miss Nellie, there can't be no doubt that those precious friends of yours will be kept at the expense of the country for the next six months—the head of the gang, at all events."

"Did they offer no resistance when you went to arrest them?"

"Some of the young ones was for a fight; but when the peelers found the joints, they knew the game was up, and went quietly enough to the station."

“Poor fellows!”

“Poor fellows, indeed! dirty poaching vagabonds! Mrs. Annesley would not like to think you had any acquaintance with such as them.”

“I never spoke to a gipsy in my life.”

“I am bound to believe you as you says it, but I felt sure you must have been speaking to them. They swore they did not kill the deer, but found it dead—exactly as you was a-talking of. They said it was lying dead in a big hole, just where we found the ground messed about. Holes don’t dig themselves, Miss Nellie. If them gipsies didn’t dig it, who did?”

“I suppose the magistrates will find the truth out.”

“You think them cleverer than we keepers. You are very hard on us—on me in particular. I wish I know’d what I have done to rile you so, Miss Nellie.”

“I was rude yesterday, Job, and I am very sorry for it. I was put out; it was

no fault of yours, and I am truly ashamed of my ill-temper and the insulting way I spoke to you. I beg your pardon, Job. Forgive me. I didn't mean what I said. Let us be friends again. You will be my friend, won't you, Job ?" and I stretched out my hand, whilst the tears were in my eyes.

"That I will, miss ; but I would like to know why you was so put out," he answered, shaking my hand warmly.

"Perhaps you may find out before long. It was no fault of yours, Job ; you were only doing your duty. I talked a great deal of nonsense. I know that poachers ought to be punished, and that it is just as wrong to steal a deer as a sheep."

"Now, I do call that handsome, miss. You have set it all straight now."

"When will the gipsies be brought before the magistrates ?"

"To-morrow, at twelve."

I finished my letter to Bertie, and put it

myself in the box at Emery Down in time for the first post.

I intended to be present when the gipsies were brought up, but I did not tell Bertie of my intention.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VERDERERS' HALL.

I KEPT my intention of being present at the meeting of the magistrates a secret, both from Mrs. Annesley and Job Nutburn. I wished to hear the case unobserved, and to be free to act as I thought duty called me. I was a self-contained girl, not like other children of my age. I had been brought up with grown-up people till I came to the New Forest. Bertie was the only young companion I had ever had, and I was twelve years old when I met him first. I was old-fashioned, as Mrs. Annesley had called me. I was either a precocious child or a very naïve woman,

I hardly know which. I was not much over fourteen, but I looked a great deal older. In figure and height, I might have passed for a woman.

I wanted to look my best in the Verderers' Hall. I have said that I was very pretty. I had never seen such large violet eyes as my own, nor such a wealth of wavy golden hair. My glass showed me an oval face, with a little mouth surmounted by a singularly short upper lip, a well-shaped nose, and a complexion of milk and roses. I am sure that there was not then, as there is not now, a particle of real vanity in my composition. I knew that God had made me fair. I did not make myself, and therefore could take no credit for my beauty. I fancy it is only women who are not quite satisfied with their looks who are vain. I have noticed more vanity in plain people than in those who are good-looking. The plain woman may have one tolerable feature, to which she is always

attracting attention ; but when all the features are good, I do not believe the possessor thinks much about them. The beauty is an established fact, and does not require airs and graces to make it more palpable ; at least, that is my own experience, and I have heard other pretty women say the same. I wanted to look my best in the Verderers' Hall, I said. Young as I was, I had an idea that men were influenced by good looks, and I wanted to influence the magistrates in my favour, for I felt convinced that I should have to speak out before them.

After breakfast I put on my prettiest frock and hat. I arranged my hair in the most becoming manner I knew of, and fastened a spray of Malmaison roses in my simple cambric fichu. It was the first time I had dressed myself to look attractive. I knew that I had succeeded. I was quite a picture of youth and beauty. I slipped out of the cottage whilst Mrs. Annesley

was ordering dinner, and ran down over the footbridge. I was soon out of sight of home, and on my way, perhaps, to Winchester gaol. I did not mark the summer beauty of the forest round me ; I did not see the flowers at my feet, nor the white clouds sailing in the soft blue sky. My face was set for Lyndhurst spire, and my head was too full and my heart too heavy to allow me to think of anything but the trying scene which was probably before me. I felt that, come what may, I meant to do my duty, and this was the one consolation of my troubled spirit.

The clock was striking twelve as I passed the Queen's House, to which the Verderers' Hall is attached. There was a crowd about the door of the old hall, policemen, keepers, gipsies, village idlers, and a pack of children, just liberated from the schoolroom over the way, were running in and out amongst the throng, making the summer noon hideous with their noise. Thanks to

the confusion they created, I slipped quietly into the hall. It was an old building, wainscoted with black oak, and had a high pitched roof with oak rafters. At the upper end a portion was railed off, with an entrance on either side. Against the wall was a raised platform, with seats and a long desk for the verderers ; and below, a table and benches for officers of the court ; in front, raised above the oak partition, stood the dock.

The magistrates, to whom the verderers give the use of their hall, were seated already on the bench. They were talking together in low tones. The chairman had a pleasant face, as good as it was handsome. I was glad that he was there, as he bore a high character for kindness of heart. I knew that he had a daughter of my age, whom he idolized. This would, perhaps, make him sympathize with me in my trouble. At all events, I felt that he would not deal harshly with a timid girl.

There were a considerable number of men leaning against the oak partition. I crept up on tiptoe, and took a place amongst them, near the right-hand entrance to the court.

There was a murmur behind me and a clattering of hob-nailed boots on the stone floor. I turned round and saw three gipsies, led in by two policemen. Job Nutburn and Harry Blake followed, with some men in velveteen coats, whom I set down to be keepers. The crowd surged in after them, and I found myself with four or five rows of faces behind me.

The charge was read. Evidence was given as to the finding of the stag's head, the discovery of the bones and the hide on the deserted camp-ground, the surprise of the gipsies over their venison supper, and the seizure of the missing joints in the caravan of the head of the gipsy gang. The bones, joints, and hide were produced. The gipsies admitted that they had eaten the venison, but denied having killed the

deer. They declared solemnly that they had found it dead in a great hole in Mark Ash. They described the situation of the pit, and their evidence was corroborated by the statement of the keepers as to the condition of the ground. The gipsies said that the animal's right leg had been broken by the fall, but that it had been despatched by a knife, the work having been done in a very bungling way, evidently with a small instrument.

The magistrates listened attentively, and probed the veracity of the gipsies by cross-examination, which did not at all shake their evidence. The chairman asked Job Nutburn if nothing had been found in the neighbourhood of the spot where the ground had been disturbed which might afford a clue to trace the diggers of the pit. He replied in the negative, and at the same time suggested that there was no occasion to go into the question of the stag's death, as the possession of the veni-

son was enough for purposes of conviction. The chairman thanked Job very satirically for giving him the law on the point; but he thought that if the gipsies could prove that they had not killed the stag, they might be allowed the benefit of extenuating circumstances.

The eldest gipsy, a splendid looking fellow, with eyes and hair as black as night, replied that he supposed all gipsies were liars, and that their word was not worth anything against a keeper's spite. All he and his pals could do was to swear that they had not killed the deer.

The feeling of the lookers-on began to turn in favour of the gipsies. Job Nutburn and his colleagues were murmuring among themselves, and ridiculing the idea that they had not dug the pit and killed the stag, when a young gipsy lad asked to be allowed to say a word. A policeman made way for him, and pushed him before the magistrates.

The boy said that he was the first to jump down into the pit where the deer was lying dead ; that he had picked up a knife tied to a piece of stick, and had hidden it up his sleeve, as he wanted to keep it for himself. He had not told his father or any one that the knife was in his possession. There it was ; and he handed it to a policeman, who passed it to the chairman.

“It is quite a lady’s knife,” said the chairman, showing it to his brother magistrates ; “not at all like a poacher’s weapon, I must allow.”

It was my penknife ! I had lent it to Bertie for the deed of dread. How strange that neither of us should have thought of it since ! I could have had no occasion to cut a pencil or mend a pen for a fortnight, or I should have missed my knife. At all events, there it was ! my mother-of-pearl handled knife with four blades, a present from Bertie on my last birthday.

“If we could find the owner of this

knife," added the chairman, as he examined the blades, "we should find the real poacher."

I stepped forward and entered the railled-off space. The eyes of the magistrates turned on me, as indeed did those of all the bystanders. I blushed scarlet, and rested my hand on the table for support.

"It is my penknife," I exclaimed. "Punish me; don't punish the gipsies."

There was a murmur through the crowd, and then a dead silence. I now felt perfectly collected; I had recovered my nerve. I had passed through days and nights of anguish and anxiety. It was a relief to be rid of suspense. I was prepared to suffer punishment, go to prison, anything rather than see the innocent suffer for the guilty.

"Miss Nellie!" cried Job, in consternation. "You here! Your knife! Who stole it and used it?"

"No one, Job; it is my knife. The stag was killed with my knife. Please,

gentlemen, let the gipsies go; punish me."

" You know the young lady, Nutburn ? " said the chairman.

" Yes, sir ; she lodges at my cottage."

" May I ask your name ? " the chairman said, turning to me with a kind but puzzled look.

" Nellie Dampier. I am living with Mrs. Annesley."

" No one will believe, Miss Dampier, that you killed the stag. You have not the strength, and I do not think you could have had the inclination."

" Let these men go, and punish me instead," I answered.

" Am I to understand that you really killed the deer ? "

" I am a poacher, sir."

" We cannot convict without some proof that you are what you say. I do not believe that so sweet a face and such a dainty person can belong to a poacher."

“The gipsies had nothing whatever to say to the death of the stag ; I had. Let them go, and punish me.”

There was a burst of approbation from the crowd. The magistrates looked puzzled, and whispered amongst themselves. There was a noise at the door, hurried steps on the floor.

“Punish me, sir ; I am a poacher,” I insisted again.

Some one pushed his way through the throng round the entrance to the court. I heard the bustle, but did not look round.

“She is not a poacher,” cried a well-known voice behind me ; “I killed the stag.”

I flushed with a sudden joy. Bertie had come from Bournemouth to save the gipsies. I was prouder of him than ever.

“Another self-accused poacher ! ” exclaimed the chairman ; “another claimant for conviction ! I have been trying poachers all my life, but never saw such

a pair of poachers as this young lady and gentleman. This is your brother, I suppose?"

"No, sir; it is Mrs. Annesley's son," I answered, blushing to the roots of my hair.

"My name is Herbert Annesley," said Bertie.

"You say, Mr. Annesley, that you absolutely killed the stag?" asked the magistrate.

"Yes, sir; I killed it alone, without assistance of any kind."

"How did you kill it?"

"With Miss Dampier's pocket-knife."

"Before you say anything more," said the chairman, turning to his brother magistrate, "I think I may as well tell you that nothing you can say will clear the gipsies; they have been found in possession of venison, and are liable to a penalty or imprisonment. I state this, as you may share Miss Dampier's idea, that

by incriminating yourself you are exculpating them."

"I am sorry for that, sir, as it seems the principal blame lies at my door."

"And at mine—I gave him the knife." I was determined to be *particeps criminis*, and go to prison with Bertie."

The magistrates smiled; a titter ran through the audience, in which the gipsies joined heartily. It must have been a curious sight—a young gentleman and lady persisting in being guilty of poaching.

The magistrate spoke kindly to Bertie, and said that he was sure that there must be some explanation to account for the position we were in. He could not believe that we had voluntarily committed an act which placed us in the power of the law.

Bertie thanked the magistrate for his good opinion, and proceeded to tell him the whole story of our foolish escapade. He told it in a straightforward and graphic manner; the only attempt he made to

extenuate the fault, which he took entirely on himself, was that the idea of the pitfall had been suggested by an incident in Captain Marryat's "Children of the New Forest," and that in entering into the pursuits of the young Beverleys, and taking lessons from them in woodcraft, he had been silly enough to forget the difference in the times, and had thus got into mischief, for which he could only express his sorrow and accept the punishment.

The magistrates listened to Bertie's narrative with much interest, and thanked him for fearlessly telling the truth. They consulted together for a few minutes, and then the chairman, addressing the gipsies, told them that the penalty for being found in possession of venison was £20, or six months' imprisonment; that the magistrates intended only to convict the owner of the caravan in which the venison had been found, though they were all morally as guilty; but, as there were extenuating

circumstances, in the fact that they had not killed the deer, the penalty would be reduced to £5, or a month's imprisonment.

“And now for you, my young friends,” he continued, turning to us, “you evidently wish to be convicted together.”

“Yes!” I cried.

“No!” exclaimed Bertie; “Miss Dampier had nothing to do with the business. I dug the hole, and I killed the stag. She begged me earnestly not to kill it—you know you did, Nellie! You wanted me to leave the animal alone, and go home with you.”

“I was afraid the stag might kill you.”

“There, sir, you hear from her own lips, that she was against my killing the deer.”

“It was only to put it out of pain that he killed it. He risked his own life that the stag might not suffer.”

“I fear,” continued the magistrate, “the excuse that you were induced to contem-

plate a clear act of poaching by reading Captain Marryat's fascinating romance—specially fascinating to us New Foresters—is not a valid one."

"I never thought it was, sir," said Bertie. "I only mentioned it to show that we are not confirmed poachers, and that it did not occur to us that we were poaching till after the deed was done."

"I suppose Miss Dampier would be quite vexed if she was acquitted?"

"I should rejoice more than words can say," I answered; "but you have convicted the gipsy, and we cannot escape. It would not be fair, sir."

There was an attempt at applause, which was at once put down by the magistrates.

"But suppose, Miss Dampier, we have no power to convict either you or Master Annesley?"

"Do not tantalize us, sir, by such an impossible suggestion."

"It is not impossible, it is not even im-

probable ; it is a simple fact. I can do nothing but dismiss the case. We have no power to fine or imprison you, much as you appear to wish it. For once, I am glad to disoblige a lady."

" You don't believe that I killed the animal ! " exclaimed Bertie, firing up.

" I believe every word you have told me. I believe you killed the deer, and with Miss Dampier's pen-knife. All the same, I must dismiss the case."

A look of profound astonishment passed over every face, except those of the bench of magistrates, who all seemed amused.

" Then we are free, sir," said Bertie, " and the gipsy goes to prison ? "

" That is so. Unless the gipsy pays the fine, I must send him to Winchester gaol."

" Your worship knows that I cannot find five pounds," said the eldest gipsy suddenly. " You may say there is a choice between the penalty and prison, but it only means prison to such as we. It does

seem as how there is one law for the poor and another for the rich."

"All men are alike here, my good fellow. We are here to administer the law without favour. But this gentleman has transgressed no law."

"I can't make it out!" cried Bertie.

"No, more can I," said Job Nutburn, not quite sure whether he was pleased or sorry.

"Let us look at the hide again," said the magistrate. "It is the hide of a red deer, is it not?"

"Yes, sir"—from more than one keeper.

"You are all aware that there is an Act of Parliament prohibiting red deer in the New Forest? That being the case, it is not an indictable offence to kill a red deer."

"It is too good to be true!" I exclaimed.
"Thank you; oh, thank you, sir!"

"Don't thank me, thank the law. You and Mr. Annesley have behaved most honourably in coming forward as you have done. I don't think we shall see either of

you here again on a charge of poaching. Here is your pocket-knife."

"Thank you, sir," I answered, with tears in my eyes. "If I had ever had an inclination for poaching, the misery of the last three weeks would have cured me of it."

"All's well that ends well," said the magistrate, offering me his hand, with a pleasant smile. "I hope I may have the pleasure of meeting the children of the New Forest in a more congenial atmosphere than that of the magistrates' bench."

"That is a real good sort," Bertie said to me, as we turned to leave the hall.

The policemen were removing the prisoner.

I had my purse with me. I had saved six pounds and a few shillings out of my dress allowance. I counted out five gold sovereigns, and handed them to the gipsy.

"We are free," I said, "and now you are!"

“God bless you!” he cried. “God bless your sweet, pretty face! If ever a poor gipsy can be of any use, you will know where to find one who would die for you.”

“We are not going to poach any more,” I added, laughing. “I wish you would promise me not to poach either.”

“I will promise, and there’s my hand on it.”

I gave him my hand, which he kissed respectfully, and we parted.

A ringing cheer shook the old oak rafters of the Verderers’ Hall, which was at once suppressed, but broke out again when we got outside the heavy door. They were cheering Bertie and me; I could not make out why. A gipsy woman ran up to me and seized my left hand; she looked at the palm. I had taken off my gloves to count the money in my purse.

“You deserve to be happy with your sweetheart!” she exclaimed, “and you will be. It is written here.”

CHAPTER XIV.

SWAN GREEN.

BERTIE had leave of absence till the following morning. His master had behaved most kindly in the matter. After hearing the whole story, he had advised Bertie to tell the truth to the magistrates and take the consequences. He thought they would look leniently on such an unpremeditated infringement of the law ; but promised, on the receipt of a telegram, to come over at once to Lyndhurst and help him out of the scrape, if he could not get out of it himself. We had got out of the scrape, but only by a legal accident.

Sunshine is always brighter after storm,

and peace and happiness, following days and nights of fear and suspense, were doubly sweet. My heart danced as I trotted along by Bertie's side on our way home. Though we had only been parted a few days, we had so much to tell each other that we agreed, before ascending the hill, to sit down and have our say out.

About a quarter of a mile from Lyndhurst the road branches off into two, one to Christchurch the other to Ringwood. Between the road lies a village green, with a cricket pitch in the centre, as sweet and idyllic a spot as any in rural England. On two sides the ground ascends in gentle slopes, covered with forest trees, broken only by a verdant alley leading to an eminence commanding peeps of distant horizons ; the old Swan Inn, with its swinging sign-post, which gives its name to the green, a saw-mill, a blacksmith forge always in full work, and some thatched cottages, the lattice windows of the largest blinking out

between the branches of two grand trees, a cedar and a deodara fringed the other sides.

The green, strewed with timber ready for the mill, was an ideal resting-place. We had a choice of seats and a moss carpet for our feet. But talk, however interesting, and scenery, however picturesque, cannot stay the pangs of hunger. Excitement over and the brain at rest, the body began to assert itself. The question was whether we should trudge home at once, or be satisfied with the modest lunch to be found at a village inn. I was strongly in favour of the latter ; indeed, I do not think I could have walked a step further without food. We would take our meal on the green. Bertie ran over to the Swan, and returned with bread, butter, and cheese, and a foaming jug of ale. It was a feast for the gods ! One of the few meals that remain impressed on the memory as thoroughly satisfactory. The bread and cheese was better than ambrosia, the brown home-brewed more

delicious than nectar ; at least, so we thought —we two young hearts relieved of a heavy anxiety.

As we sat chattering between our mouthfuls, we saw Job Nutburn coming along by the great oak tree ; no one could mistake his swinging gait and long strides. We hailed him as he approached, and asked him to partake our humble fare. I was specially attentive to Job, and frothed up a mug of ale to please him. I wanted to make up for my rudeness, and in some way, too, for his disappointment at not being able to send the poachers to gaol. I felt that not only had I hurt his feelings, but baulked him in the dearest wish of his keeper's heart.

“ Here's to your health, Miss Nellie,” he said, as he tossed off the amber ale, “ and to yours, Master Bertie. Just to think that you were the poachers, after all ! It beats cockfighting, it do ! I shall not get over it to my dying day. You, poachers ! ”

“ We are not poachers,” said Bertie ; “ we only killed a red deer. The magistrates say it’s not poaching to kill them. Look out, Job, Miss Nellie and I mean to catch another one.”

“ Now, don’t ‘e, Master Bertie ; don’t ‘e try any more of them tricks. I don’t want to give you notice to quit, but I can’t have poachers for lodgers. It ain’t respectable for me, a keeper.”

“ But we are not poachers. You miss the point, Job.”

“ Well, it’s a rum go that the colour of a beast should make the difference. I suppose if a pheasant was blue you might shoot it, or a woodcock pink ; that wouldn’t be poaching, of course, Master Bertie. But don’t let me catch you, that’s all.”

“ With a blue pheasant, or a red woodcock ? ” I laughed.

“ None of your chaff, Miss Nellie. You knows what I mean. Of course, it is enough to put a keeper’s back up.”

“ What’s enough ? ” asked Bertie.

“ To have had all this trouble for nothing.”

“ You are sorry, then, that we are not locked up for six months ? ”

“ Not exactly that. I should have been sorry to see you or Miss Nellie in trouble, but I should have liked to have seen some one catch it hot.”

“ Poor Job ! Take another glass of beer,” I said, offering the jug.

“ At all events, miss, you might have let me have had the satisfaction of punishing those varmints. Gipsies is varmints, and nothing else.”

“ Vermin want food as well as other animals,” I remarked.

“ You’re not going to give us your radical notions again, I hope, miss. You did not mean what you said—you told me this morning ? ”

“ No, Job. I was only saying that vermin and gipsies want food.”

“ They don’t want it ; they takes it.”

“Never mind, Nutburn,” said Bertie ; “I’ll be bound you’ll catch them at it again before long.”

“It won’t be for not looking after them. Lor, Master Bertie, what a thing good looks is !”

“The gipsy was a handsome fellow. I never saw such black eyes,” I remarked.

“Drat the gipsy ! I wasn’t a-thinking of him ; I was a-thinking of you, miss ; just to see how you fetched the old gentleman ! If you had killed all the deer in the forest, he would have looked sweet at you, and said that you was too pretty to do anything wrong. I heard him say as how you was a beauty ; and he was right. I never thought much of you afore, but somehow you did look a stunner to-day.”

“Thank you, Job, for your compliment. If you won’t take another glass, you might go on and tell Mrs. Nutburn to make us one of her best puddings in honour of Master Bertie, who will be at home for supper.”

“That I will, miss, and she’ll be right glad to do it. This very morning she was saying as how the house was as dull as ditch water since the young master left.”

“She was always blowing me up for getting into mischief,” said Bertie, laughing.

“Lor, sir, the women likes a bit of mischief, though they pretends they don’t. I only knows I wishes you was back. The missus keeps her tantrums for me now. She’s a good woman, God bless her! but she has got a tongue.”

“And you like me to take the edge off, eh, Job?”

“That’s about it, sir.”

“I’ll take a bit of it off before I go back to Bournemouth. I say, Job, don’t tell mother that I’m coming home to supper. I want to give her a jolly surprise. And don’t let out about the red deer; I want to tell her the story myself.”

“All right, Master Bertie; mum’s the word;” and Job walked off.

We lingered on the green long after our meal was over. Bertie had so much to tell me about his school. He was perfectly happy, I could see, without my company. How different it was with me ! His school-fellows, he said, were a rare good lot ; there were one or two swells amongst them, but they were not a bit less jolly for having handles to their names. The masters were popular with the boys, but the headmaster was a tiptopper—as great a brick in the schoolroom as in the playground. Al with his bat and with his books.

We talked and talked till there was nothing left to talk about, and then started for the cottage, going over Bolton's cut, which was longer for us, but it gave us a walk across the forest instead of on the high-road. We struck our stream and followed it to the ford. I told Bertie to hide himself in a thicket, and that I would run and fetch his mother.

Mrs. Annesley asked me why I had

absented myself from lessons and dinner without leave. I gave her a big kiss, and promised to give my explanation later, in the meantime I begged her to come with me and see such a curious animal. I was in such boisterous spirits that she knew that nothing could be amiss.

“What kind of animal?” she asked.
“Nothing nasty, I hope.”

“Very nasty,” I answered.

“Then I won’t look at it, Nellie. I do not like toads and vipers and those sort of creatures.”

“You must come, mammie. It is nothing small and mean like them; it is big. It must be nearly six feet long.”

“Not a snake, child?”

“No, mammie; nothing dangerous. I am sure you will like to see it.”

“Where is it?”

“Only just across the stream, in yonder bushes.”

She threw a knitted shawl over her head

and came out with me. I led her to the thicket, and sent Rannock, who had followed me from the house, into the bushes. Such a joyous barking announced that he had discovered something pleasant.

“Bring him out!” I cried; “good dog, bring him out!”

In a minute there was a movement in the thicket, and Rannock came leaping out, followed by Bertie on all-fours, keeping his face concealed.

“What is it?” asked Mrs. Annesley.
“Who is it?”

“A horrid, dangerous animal, called Bertie Annesley.”

“My boy, my darling boy!” exclaimed Mrs. Annesley, turning pale and dropping into the arms of her son, who now stood erect and ready to be welcomed home. “Is anything wrong?”

“Nothing, mammie. I am as jolly as a sand-boy and as hungry as a hunter.”

“I hope you haven’t run away from

school, Bertie. You haven't got into a scrape?"

"Not a scrape at school, but a bad one here."

"Where?"

"Here, at Lyndhurst. But we have got out of it better than we expected." And then we told her every detail of our adventure, and its consequences.

"You have had," she said, "a narrow escape of imprisonment. You must promise me, both of you, never again to play at poachers, or I shall leave the forest."

"Leave the forest—our dear forest!" cried Bertie; "that would break both our hearts. You need not fear any more poaching exploits; we have already had one too many. The anxiety of the last fortnight, especially what Nellie has gone through, is enough to make us hate the name of game for the rest of our natural lives."

We had a joyous supper. Mrs. Nutburn's

pudding was a work of art. We ate and laughed till we could eat and laugh no longer. Bertie and I were tired after the anxious morning we had passed through, and our little *coup de theatre* had rather upset Mrs. Annesley. Bertie had to be off by daybreak to catch the first down-train at Ringwood, a nine-mile walk. He and I were to say good-bye overnight; his mother was to see him in the morning in her room, where she had promised to make him a cup of coffee with her Etna.

“ You have not played Mrs. Nutburn a trick, Bertie,” were my last words.

“ I’m not off yet!” was Bertie’s reply.

Next morning I was awoke at an early hour by the violent ringing of a bell. I jumped up in a fright, and ran to my door. Mrs. Nutburn was in the passage before me, as alarmed as myself. If I had not been so frightened, I should have roared, laughing at her strange appearance. She had on her husband’s velveteen coat, his boots

on her feet, and her hair was covered with curl papers. The bell went on ringing peal after peal. Mrs. Annesley peeped out of her room, but seemed to take the disturbance very quietly, I thought. I looked out of the passage window, and saw that the old white horse was tethered to the back door bell-handle.

I pointed out the bell-ringer to Mrs. Nutburn, and burst into a fit of laughter.

“What’s all the row about?” called out Job, from some hidden place on the attic floor.

“It’s that tiresome brat again!” cried Mrs. Nutburn, in a temper. “He ought to be ashamed of himself, waking honest folk out of their first sleep, and making us all meet here in our bedgowns. It’s disgraceful; it’s undecent. I’ll just write to his master, and beg him to give young Master Annesley a taste of the birch. He wants to be tingled up a bit, he do!”

The bell went on ringing and I laughing..

“Is it Bertie pulling the bell?” asked Mrs. Annesley, with affected non-complicity.

“I wish it was Master Bertie; I’d empty the water-jug over his head to cool his impudence.”

“Bertie has tied the old horse to the bell,” I said, as well as I could for laughing,

“The young rascal told Job he would play me a trick before he left. I might have known it was only one of his pranks, and stayed in bed instead of masquerading here in men’s clothes. Drat the boy! there never was such a mischievous monkey.”

“He really is a very naughty boy to disturb us all in this way,” said Mrs. Annesley, quietly.

“The curious thing is that I can’t help loving the lad all the same, though he is that aggravating,” said Mrs. Nutburn, with an aggrieved look, when her anger had run its short course.

There was another woman who agreed with her sentiment. And a girl, too!

CHAPTER XV.

THE PRIMA DONNA.

THERE was nothing in the next two years to mark their flight. Not a single adventure relieved the monotony of my forest life. Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, came and went, but I did not grow enthusiastic over their changeful beauty as I used to do. I no longer measured time by the seasons, but by Bertie's holidays. The year was divided in three—by the Easter, Mid-summer, and Christmas vacations. When Bertie was at home, I was as bright and gay as before he went to school. We resumed our forest wanderings, but we did not take so much exercise, except in the Christmas holidays, when we scarcely ever missed a

meet of fox or staghounds, and generally contrived to see a good deal of the run. At other times we spent the hours pleasantly wherever Bertie pitched his painting umbrella. I wanted no better amusement than to sit on a camp-stool at his side and watch his habile brush make the ugly canvas reflect the forest scenery as in a mirror. He took lessons at school, and made the most of them, for his work had almost passed out of the amateur stage. He had the soul and the touch of a painter, and had latterly quite come to the decision of taking up painting as a profession. Mrs. Annesley did not at first like the idea ; she had hoped that he would have taken advantage of his uncle's offer of a university education, and have subsequently gone to the bar, to finish, of course, as Lord Chancellor ! But she could not resist his coaxing appeals to be allowed to choose his own life—the life of art, for which she could not help acknowledging that he had very unusual qualifications.

If Bertie loved painting, I had a real passion for music. When he was away, I devoted my spare moment to my favourite study. Mrs. Annesley was astounded at my progress. I had distanced my mistress, who could not follow my rapid fingers as they flew through the most intricate passages of Schumann and Chopin, and revelled in the inspired melodies of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. I had taken a few lessons from a master at Southampton, but derived little benefit, except, perhaps, in the way of fingering. In taste, feeling, and brilliancy of execution, I think I could have given him more hints than he gave me.

From a child I had possessed a voice, and had caught up every air I heard; but lately I had begun to sing with a method. I obtained a set of *solfeggio* exercises by Concone, and diligently practised them. I found that they gave me increased power, and a facility that surprised me; but I had an exceptional organ to work on. Mrs.

Annesley said it was a thorough Italian voice, and that I had *lagrime sulla voce*, a sympathetic timbre hardly ever met with away from the South.

Music became my life. I could sit for hours at the piano exercising, now my fingers, now my voice, and often dreaming over the notes, composing melodies to suit my dreams. My sweetest melodies were inspired by my sweetest dreams, and they were all of Bertie.

I was now seventeen, and he was two years older. He was to leave school after the summer term, and to spend a year at least in the *atelier* of a celebrated French artist, residing in the suburbs of Paris. Bertie, brought up in the mystic haunts of the New Forest, had imbibed much of its poetic nature. He felt it, but found technical difficulty in transferring his feelings to the canvas. He knew the language, but wanted an alphabet to write it down. In the English school he could not see the

imagination he saw in the French school ; there was too much fact and too little fancy. In a French picture he saw more than a primrose ; he felt the spring air, the movement of the leaves, the nodding of the flower. In an English picture it was a primrose, “and nothing more.” One appealed to the heart through the eye, the other to the eye alone. Bertie saw that the Frenchman had discovered the alphabet of breadth, and mystery, and true poetic feeling ; and so, when his Indian uncle, to whom he had sent a painting, approved of his wish to become an artist, and offered to make him the same allowance he would have made had he gone to the university, Bertie determined to see what Paris could teach him. If he once knew the alphabet, he was sure he could spell the words and make the words into sentences.

Mrs. Annesley used laughingly to say that she little expected her cottage home to become the temple of Clio and Melpo-

mene, and that her boy and girl should have given themselves so successfully to the sister arts of painting and music.

She thought so much of my vocal powers that she wrote to my grandmother, suggesting that it was a talent worth cultivating, and cleverly hinting that it might make me independent. To our astonishment the dowager, as we always called her, caught at the idea, and offered to pay for lessons in singing. She stipulated that the master should be an Italian, or at all events brought up in the Italian school. She preferred the Milanese school, and named Lamperti as the prince of singing masters. There is no neighbourhood so unmusical as the New Forest. Vocalization is left to the birds, and perhaps wisely. Professors of singing were, therefore, at a discount, and I was not able to avail myself of my grandmother's offer. She would have been pleased to have got rid of me in so cheap a way, but she did not propose that I should come to town for instruction.

I went on with my exercises, fearing all the time that I might be falling into bad ways ; but I could not give up my singing. It was a delightful occupation, and Mrs. Annesley showed real pleasure in listening to my self-taught songs. I had given up all hopes of cultivating my voice under an Italian master, or even of hearing good singing, which would have helped me much, when one morning I walked into Lyndhurst to order some groceries for Mrs. Annesley. I did my commission, and for a change started to return to Emery Down by the way of Pike's Hill. Passing a house, which I knew was let in lodgings, I heard sounds which riveted me to the spot. Volumes of voice came floating out into the air from the open French windows. The notes were full, clear, and wondrously sweet ; they rose and fell in liquid harmony, sometimes soaring into passionate declamation, and anon dipping into the tender softness of the *mezza voce*. Little as I

knew myself of the mechanical training of the voice, I was able to recognize the consummate art of the singer. The shake was like the trill of a bird, and the power of steadily swelling on a note, without the least approach to the *vibrato*, and letting it die away in lengthened sweetness, was a revelation. But there was a great deal more than art; there was a soul for music, which could be acquired by no training, however good. My musical instinct told me that the singer was an artist of the first rank. The aria she broke into after her exercises was unknown to me; the phrasing was perfect, and the execution had that special charm of conveying to the listener a sense of security, a feeling that a false note was as impossible as on a hand-organ. The timbre of voice was full of melody and pathos, and went straight to my heart. The words were Italian; I felt certain that the singer was Italian, too. I listened to the melody, which seemed to express the

agony of despair and a prayer to Heaven for help. I found afterwards that my interpretation of the music was not far wrong. It was “Pace, mio Dio,” from Verdi’s weird opera of “La Forza del Destin.”

The aria finished; I lingered, in the hope of hearing more. I was not to be disappointed. I recognized the prelude; it was from the opera of Faust, and the singer commenced Margarite’s aria d’intrata “Non sono Bella.” I knew the air by heart, and could follow every phrase. The Jewel Song followed, given with extraordinary brilliancy of execution. Here was talent I never dreamed of! never hoped to hear! Then the singer paused for a few minutes, and broke out into that glorious prayer in the hour of repentance and final triumph over the evil one. I followed the ascending keys till they developed into the full grand major. I was carried away by the inspiration of the composer and singer.

I seemed like one who had heard an angel singing in some beautiful trance. My heart beat fast, my head turned. I caught hold of the garden-gate for support, and then sank to the ground, overcome with an emotion, which those who do not know the influence of harmony on a soul filled with music may ridicule and despise.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on a sofa in a little sitting-room. A lady was bending over me, bathing my temples with Eau de Cologne. The breeze came in through the window, and brought the scent of flowers from the little sunlit garden. But what was breeze or sun or flower to me compared with the beautiful face looking tenderly into mine? I could not speak, but, taking the lady's hand, I kissed my thanks.

“Poor girl!” she said, with the sweetest voice—singers do not always possess sweet speaking voices. “I wonder what made you faint. It was lucky I went out and

saw you lying at the gate. Was the sun too hot?"

"If I fainted," I whispered, "it was your singing that made me lose consciousness."

"Did I frighten you with my bellowings?" she asked, with a laugh. "I often think I shall sing the roof off this small house, or, at all events, bring the ceiling down."

"Your voice did not seem loud to me; it seemed the most glorious voice I ever dreamed of hearing. It overcame me, I suppose."

"You must love music very much to be so moved."

"It is the joy of my life."

"Can you play or sing, my dear?"

"A little—only what you would call a very little. I have had a few lessons on the piano; none in singing."

"Are you well enough to let me hear what you can do? Such a love as yours for music ought to make you a musician."

“I could not play before you. You would laugh at my performance.”

“Never, dear. The more I learn, the more ignorant I feel, and the less likely to judge others harshly, least of all a novice like you.”

“Indeed, I could not play before you ; the very idea makes me shake with nervousness. I would do anything else you asked but that.”

“That is the only thing you can do for me. Trust me ! I am not such an awful looking woman, am I ?”

“Your face is very sweet and beautiful. I feel as if I had known you for a long time. I could love you, if you would let me. It is strange, I never felt like this to any one before.”

“We both love music. We are sympathetic. I felt drawn to you the moment you opened your eyes and looked in mine.”

“Our eyes are the same colour,” I exclaimed—“both violet !”

“Another bond of union,” laughed the singer.

“I wish my voice was like yours.”

“Let me hear it.”

“I will play first. I do not feel so shy now that I know you really like me.”

I rose and went to the piano. What should I play? Something easy at first. My fingers glided into one of Mendelssohn’s “Lieder ohne Worte.” I played fluently, and with some feeling, but not as well as usual. I stopped.

“Go on,” she said. “You have a delicious touch. You are a little frightened, I see. That will soon pass off.”

I played a brilliant valse by Chopin, and played it with more confidence.

“Bravo! your execution is wonderful. But I think you love classical music best.”

My only answer was to commence Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata.” My nervousness was gone. I was on my mettle. I played as I had seldom played

before. I forgot that I was playing to any one. I thought only of the divine melody pouring from my fingers. I finished, and without a moment's interval went off into that most glorious of love songs, "Adelaida," which I rendered with all the pathos and passion at my command.

The lady was silent. I feared that I had not played to her taste. I looked round ; she was weeping. I knew that I had touched her heart, and I was satisfied.

" You have a wonderful talent, child ! " she exclaimed, as she wiped her eyes. " Your gift is straight from Heaven. How old are you ? "

" Seventeen last birthday."

" You have made good use of your years. You can make the piano speak as few can do. Now, you must let me hear your voice."

I played a few chords, and began that old but never hackneyed song, " Home, Sweet Home." I sang it simply, but with

much pathos. I had no home; I was an outcast; and perhaps this very feeling sent the tears into my voice, and made me sing the touching words almost too emotionally. The lady stared at me in silence, with a far-away look in her lovely eyes. Perhaps she was homeless, too; that would be another bond of sympathy. She approached the piano, and, throwing her arms round me, gave me a kiss which made me thrill all over—a kiss of tender love, such a kiss as had never been pressed on my lips before. I had been kissed by my dear Nannie, by Sister Lucy, and Mrs. Annesley; but their kisses were cold compared with that of the unknown singer.

“Bella, *molto bella!*” she murmured, like one in a dream, looking me steadily in the face. “You will be a splendid artist!” she exclaimed aloud. “You think that I sing well. I do not deny it, but you will easily surpass me, if you have the patience for hard study.”

“ Study is my delight; but sing like you—never, never ! ”

“ You must not call your practising study. It is child’s play to what you would have to go through. You would have to work for weary hours, till you got sick of your own voice, and without feeling that you made much progress. You will have to place every note, sing your scales, practise your intervals, keep to exercises, without a song to break the monotony of everlasting runs and shakes. You will have to swell and diminish on each note in your compass till you have learned the mystery of the *mezza voce*. ”

“ I could bear all this and much more to be able to sing only half as well as you do. But it is no use hoping for impossibilities. There are no masters to be got in these parts.”

“ Would not a mistress answer as well ? ”

“ Certainly. Can you recommend one ? ” I asked eagerly.

“I know of one.”

“Where is she to be found? I would write to her at once.”

“In Lyndhurst—in this very house. It will be a real pleasure to train such a voice. When shall we begin?”

“You would give me lessons! It is too good to be true; besides——” and I hesitated.

“Besides what?”

“I expect grandmamma would think it too expensive to let me learn from such a great singer.”

“My lessons will be very costly, I know. You will have to pay me in——”

“Gold, of course.”

“Something more precious than gold. I shall ask for your love. I cannot tell how it is, but I feel that your love can make me happy. I have never seen you before, and yet something tells me that you can fill the void in my sad heart. Can you love me, dear child, just a little?”

“Not a little, but a great, great deal. When you kissed me so tenderly, I knew that I could love you almost better than any one else in the world,” I answered, flushing as I thought of Bertie.”

“Almost? Then I shall have a rival. Take care. We Italians are very jealous.”

“Are you an Italian? You speak English like an Englishwoman.”

“My father was English, my mother Italian. I have always been happy in Italy. In England, I have had much trouble; so I call Italy my country. *Italia bella, patria mia!* Are you too tired for a lesson now?”

“Not too tired; but I must run home. I have promised mammie never to stay away from dinner without first telling her.”

“How far off is your home?”

“Two miles. I shall have to run all the way.”

“I shall not let you run when you have

commenced your lessons. It is bad for the voice. When shall we begin? To-morrow? Shall we say eleven o'clock. Half an hour is as much as you will be able to stand at first. *A rivederla;*” and she kissed my cheek again.

The kiss seemed natural, and yet an hour ago we were strangers.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MOTHER'S LOVE.

MRS. ANNESLEY was by no means pleased with the acquaintance I had made, though I had not told her of the strange intimacy which had grown up in so short a time between the *prima donna* and myself.

The woman was an opera-singer ; she was sure the dowager would not like me to make friends with such people—as if I cared what my odious grandmother liked or disliked ! I should rather have been inclined to think that if I acted in opposition to her opinion, I should be more likely to be right than if I followed it. I told Mrs. Annesley so, upon which she asked

if I would wish to act in opposition to her wishes, and that in this matter she should certainly agree with Lady Dampier.

“In fact,” I said, “it is your opinion, not grandmamma’s.”

“It is my opinion that a girl of your age should not make acquaintance with any one without the authority of your guardian for the time being, least of all with an actress or an opera-singer.”

“If you only saw my new friend, you would understand how I have taken to her. She is beautiful!”

“Virtue and beauty do not always go hand in hand.”

“I am sure they do in the case of my prima donna.”

“Excuse me, Nellie, but I cannot accept your judgment on such a matter as infallible. You are young and innocent, and may be deceived.”

“My heart tells me that this lady is everything that is good and pure and noble.

She is not happy, and I want to make her happy. She has offered to give me lessons in singing."

"A prima donna such as you describe would be a very expensive singing mistress."

"She has offered to teach me for nothing. She has tried my voice, and says that it is so good that it would be a pleasure to train it."

"That is very flattering, Nellie. I know you have an exceptional voice, and exceptional musical talent, and I want to find you the best instruction. All that you say about the lady seems almost too delightful, too disinterested. She is beautiful, charming, a consummate artist, and offers to give you lessons gratis. I can't understand it. If it had been a gentleman, I might have laid so liberal an offer down to your *beaux yeux*; but I confess I can't see what object this lady has to gain by teaching you at all—much less for nothing. The prima donna as a class is grasping."

“It is all out of pure kindness of heart. She saw how her singing moved me, that I had a soul for music, and that some strange sympathy existed between herself and me. You won’t forbid me to take advantage of such an offer? I do long for some help; it is so difficult to study quite alone.”

“I won’t say ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ Nellie, at once. I must make some inquiries about this Italian lady. It does seem an opportunity not to be thrown away.”

“I have promised to take my first lesson to-morrow at eleven.”

“My dear Nellie, you are not at liberty, as long as you are under my charge, to make any engagements without consulting me. Whilst you are with me, you must look on yourself as my child—my daughter.”

“I do, indeed I do. I like to be thought your daughter. The people in the village think I am. They call me Miss Annesley, and I never correct them. You are the

only mother I know. You have been as good as a mother to me, and I wish to be your dutiful daughter. I know it was wrong to make promises without consulting you. But remember, mammie, here was just what we wanted—an Italian singing mistress. I was fascinated, as you will be, and I promised without thinking. Do let me go to-morrow. The lady will think it so rude if I do not. She will be offended, and I shall lose this wonderful chance. You will let me keep my appointment, won't you, mammie dear?" and I kissed her pale cheeks.

" You are a coaxing little puss, and think to conquer my better judgment by a kiss. You are taking a leaf out of Bertie's book. I really must know who this woman is before you see more of her. I don't want to disappoint you, so I will go into Lyndhurst as soon as dinner is over. Job will drive me in. No, I won't have you for Jehu. I must be independent, and be able to make

my investigations out of shot of a pair of prejudiced ears."

"I will run and ask Job to have the pony-carriage ready in an hour's time. If you pass her lodging, you may hear her voice, and you will be as captivated as I was."

"You have heard of the sirens, Nellie?"

"Those horrid women who sat on the sea-shore without any clothes, and dined on sailors? You are not going to compare my beautiful prima donna to those singing cannibals, are you, mammie? You don't think she will eat me?"

"Not exactly, Nellie."

"You will promise me, mammie, not to be unfairly prejudiced. Do not condemn my friend for being an opera-singer. I have often heard you sing the praises of Jenny Lind."

"Trust me, Nellie. There are black and white sheep in all professions, and I know that many actresses are good and noble

women; but you will allow that young ladies do not generally seek their friends on the stage."

" You are taking it for granted that my singer is an opera-singer. She has never told me that she is one."

" You called her a *prima donna*."

" Never mind what I called her. I know you are quite right, mammie, to wish to know something of this lady. I am certain you can hear nothing but good. I want you to see about it to-day, so that I may not lose my lesson to-morrow."

I helped Mrs. Annesley to prepare for driving into Lyndhurst, and Job to harness the pony. I was delighted when they really started. I went to my piano to pass the time of suspense till they returned. I played piece after piece, and then I took to singing. I went over my exercises carefully, and afterwards opened the score of "Faust." I tried over all the songs which

my prima donna had sung, and could not help thinking that there was some similarity in our voices. It struck me most as I worked out a cadenza, which she had introduced into the Jewel Song. It was a difficult and very original cadence, and hard to catch accurately. It engrossed me for a full quarter of an hour, but my perfect ear helped me to get it at last. I sang it over several times, pleased with my success.

“Brava!” cried a voice at the door. “You have already learned something from your new mistress.”

“How you frightened me, mammie! I did not hear the pony-carriage. What do you mean?” I said, turning round to find Mrs. Annesley smiling behind me.

“I meant what I said, that you have learned that cadenza from your prima donna.”

“You have heard her sing!”

“Yes. She sang me the Jewel Song

from 'Faust.' I particularly remarked that cadenza as being new to me."

"Did she sing anything else?"

"'Come bello,' from 'Lucrezia Borgia.' I asked for it, as I once heard Grisi sing it, and thought it the most lovely song I ever heard."

"You called on her, you dear mammie! and what do you think of her?"

"That she is quite beautiful."

"And her singing."

"Perfection."

"I see by your face that you have heard nothing against my new friend."

"I heard nothing but good. Every one was singing the signora's praises. She has been at Lyndhurst a month. All the principal residents have called on her, and cannot make too much of her; but she refuses all invitations.

"Did you hear her name?"

"Beatrice, or Bice Bardi. She is a favourite *prima donna* in Italy, where she

bears the highest character. She is here to rest and recruit her strength ; she has been singing too much."

"Who gave you all this information ?"

"I met the clergyman in the street ; he told me that he had heard a good deal about her from a Roman friend."

"So you thought you might call on her, mammie ?"

"I ventured to do so, as she had been so extraordinarily kind to you. You did not tell me that you fainted yourself into her acquaintance."

"I was ashamed to confess that I had been so silly. I don't think it was a real faint, but the beauty of the singing upset me. I am afraid that the musical chords of my heart are too sensitive. But tell me about your visit."

"They must be, if a song sends you into unconsciousness. Well, Nellie, I sent in my card, and was received very graciously by the signora. I told her that my child had

returned home that morning raving of her beauty, her singing, and her kindness, and that I should be too pleased that she should become her pupil. I broached the subject of remuneration as delicately as I could, but she absolutely refused to take any, saying that she would only teach you on her own terms, that she was drawn to you by some singular sympathy, some musical affinity, and that to cultivate such a voice as yours would be a labour of love. She spoke of you as a musical prodigy, and prophesied great things, if your patience and perseverance equalled your talent. I could protest no longer, and accepted her offer gratefully."

"Then I may keep my appointment to-morrow?"

"Certainly. She expects you at eleven."

"Oh, how delightful! What a lucky girl I am! Did she offer to sing to you?"

"I ventured to ask her if I might hear the voice that had so touched your heart.

She complied at once, and all I can say is that I am as fascinated with your prima donna's voice and beauty as you are."

I had never seen the quiet Mrs. Annesley so enthusiastic ; she kept on at intervals humming the air of the Jewel Song. There was a light in her eyes and a smile on her lips which I never saw unless Bertie was by her side.

I was not a minute late, you may be sure, for my lesson. The mellow sound of Lyndhurst clock had not died away when I opened the gate into the little garden of the signora's cottage. She was evidently waiting for me, for the click of the latch brought her out of the window to meet me. She kissed me and took off my hat and jacket, when I entered the house. She asked me my Christian name, as she thought Miss Annesley was too formal a way of addressing one who was to be her artistic child. I answered "Nellie," but quite forgot to say that my surname was

Dampier, not Annesley, accustomed as I was to be called Miss Annesley in Lyndhurst, where I rather liked to pass for Bertie's sister.

She led me at once to the piano, and tried the compass of my voice, which she said was a high soprano, and would be very powerful. She proceeded to show me the method of producing it with the greatest effect and the least exertion to myself. She made me lie on the sofa, and indicated the exact spot from which I should draw my breath. My struggles to bring my breath into obedience to my will would have been amusing if they had not been so exhausting. She assured me that I had not so many tricks to unlearn as most self-taught singers. She praised the timbre of my voice, and said it was not unlike her own. I could not have desired a greater compliment. After singing for half an hour, she made me take a glass of wine, gazing at me whilst I sipped it with

those beautiful dark eyes of hers, which seemed to have a question in their violet depths.

Whilst I rested, she told me something of her artistic life. Her home was in Florence, where she still lived with her grandmother. She had studied first there, and afterwards at Milan. She had made a very successful *début* on the operatic stage when quite a young girl at a small town on the Riviera, not far from Genoa. Since that time she had sung with success at nearly every town in Italy where there was a theatre, and had settled down as *prima donna assoluta* at the opera houses of the great Italian cities. She had had many tempting offers to sing in England, France, and Russia, but hitherto circumstances had kept her in the land of her affection and her birth. She might have made a fortune if she had deserted her country, but she loved her art too much to leave the only country where it was

really understood and appreciated. She valued the opinion of the smallest town in Italy more than that of London, Paris, and St. Petersburg combined. In Italy every soul loved music, and knew what music was. Every individual judged for himself, and was not led by the verdict of fashion. Artists were applauded in London who would be hissed off the stage in Milan, and so she would rather sing to her dear Italians for silver than for gold to others. She loved England for many things, but not for its music. She had once spent some happy months in this country, and tears came into her eyes at the recollection. It was long ago. She had now come back for a short sojourn, as a thorough change of air and scene was ordered her, after having overtaxed her strength in a long professional career. She had returned to England without having settled where she should spend her holiday, and had only fixed on Lyndhurst after

hearing the praises of its summer beauty sung by some ladies who travelled with her from Paris to Boulogne. She had found it all they described it to be. The soft New Forest air and its peaceful beauty had acted favourably on mind and body ; but now that she was convalescent, she was beginning to find Lyndhurst a little dull, and she looked on my appearance on the scene as a special act of kindness from her patron saint. My lesson was continued for another half-hour ; my heart was in my work, and my kind mistress was good enough to say that I was an apt pupil.

Before I left, the beautiful prima donna asked me, if I was not in a hurry, to play the accompaniment to one of her *scenas*. She declared that I had a special gift for accompanying, and that it would be a real service if I could spare an hour after my daily lesson to enable her to practise her parts. She begged me to get leave to lunch with her. I was delighted at the

idea. It was as good as a lesson to hear her sing, as well as an intense pleasure.

Mrs. Annesley, of course, raised no objection, and seemed pleased that I could do anything to lessen the obligation I was under to the signora for her gratuitous instruction. Every day drew us closer to one another in sympathy and affection. When I was near her, I seemed to breathe a new atmosphere—an atmosphere of love. I forgot to fret over my heartless parents, my cruel grandmother, my lost home, my desolate condition. My life was now sweet with love and music. What could I want more? The love I felt for Beatrice Bardi was a new kind of love to me, the confiding adoration of a child for a mother. It seemed that I had loved her always, that I had seen that beautiful face in my dreams, heard that sweet voice. Is there such a thing, I asked myself, as spiritual communion? Could I have known and loved her in the spirit. But I put away

the idea as beyond my poor metaphysics, and tried only to think of my music.

I made rapid progress. I astonished my mistress. I astonished myself. My voice gained strength and compass. I took the high C without an effort. I was not allowed to sing my old songs. I was only to keep to the exercises which the signora wrote out for me. Mrs. Annesley did not like our musical evenings interrupted, at least the vocal part of them, and tried to coax a song out of me; but, of course, without effect.

After I had been taking my lessons daily for three weeks, I persuaded the signora one afternoon to walk with me to my modest home. She was to sup with us, and be driven back by moonlight. It was a lovely day in early summer. The trees had not lost their fresh green tints, and the hawthorns were still white with blossom. My companion said that she had not been so happy for many a long year. As we

strolled under the sweeping beeches, and past verdant forest-lawns, and bosquets musical with song of thrush and blackbird, her face beamed with pleasure, and her voice broke into snatches of merry melodies. The rabbits running into the bracken, a herd of dappled deer crossing our path, a heron in the stream, a squirrel running up a tree,—each in their turn called forth little cries of joyous surprise, like those of a happy child.

Mrs. Annesley welcomed our guest with more than cordiality. The *prima donna* was in rapture with everything.

The cottage was so pretty, the tiny rooms so cosy, the cream so thick, the butter so fresh. How lucky we were to find such a delightful retreat in the very bosom of the wild woods! Did we know of such another near us, where she could get away from dusty roads and village noises, where she could exercise her voice without fear of disturbing any neighbours

but the birds, and drink her fill of forest scenery from her window? Our cottage in the wood had turned her against her roadside lodgings. We must find her a cottage; it mattered not how humble, if she could only have the same pure air, the same peaceful repose, and the green trees round it.

“Why should not the signora pay us a visit, Nellie?” asked Mrs. Annesley. “I am sure you would give her your room and take Bertie’s.”

“That is just what I was thinking, mammie; it would be too delightful. You must come, signora. We should be so happy together.”

“Happy! it would be happiness indeed to sleep under the same roof as my dear pupil. But I could not think of upsetting your arrangements. I am quite comfortable at Lyndhurst, and no longer lonely now that Nellie spends her days with me.”

“Nellie has deserted me,” said Mrs. Annesley, smiling.

"I have indeed been very selfish. I forgot that I was depriving you of the dear child's society."

"Nellie knows I was only joking. She says I am too fond of my own company. I only spoke of my solitary hours to induce you to come here and enliven them. I will not press you, but will only assure you that it would be a real pleasure to me, as well as Nellie, if you will try our cottage fare. Think of the long walks you will save your pupil."

"Mammie will not care much for my lessons, will she, signora?"

"Is that a hint to me to stay away?"

"You know I should jump for joy if you would come to us." And I accentuated my words with a kiss, which seemed rather to surprise Mrs. Annesley.

"Then I will really accept Mrs. Annesley's invitation. I will come to-morrow for a few days."

“ You will do nothing of the sort,” I exclaimed. “ I am not going to trust you out of my sight. We have got you here, and mean to keep you. Write a line to your maid, and tell her how to pack up what you require. Our landlord will take the note and bring back your things. I am glad that we have no room for Teresa, as I shall enjoy waiting on you myself.”

“ Nellie is very imperious, signora,” said Mrs. Annesley. “ You must obey her.”

“ If you and your granddaughter are against me, I suppose I must yield at discretion.”

“ Nellie is not my granddaughter, signora. What made you think so ? ”

“ She has several times mentioned that her grandmother wished her to take lessons from an Italian, so I put you down as that relative, though I thought you were too young to have a grown-up grandchild. She is your daughter, then ? ”

"Nellie is as dear to me as a child, but we are not even related."

"Not related!" cried the prima donna. "How curious that you should both have the same name!"

"But we have not," said Mrs. Annesley.

"I never told you my name was Nellie Annesley, I am sure."

"I addressed you as Miss Annesley, and you did not correct me."

"I am so accustomed to be considered Mrs. Annesley's daughter, that I never remark when I am spoken to as Miss Annesley."

"May I ask your real name?"

"Nellie Dampier, Eleanor Dampier at your service;" and I dropped a mock curtsy.

"Eleanor Dampier!" exclaimed the signora, turning deadly pale, and seizing both my hands. "Speak, child, speak—who was your father?"

"Sir Lionel Dampier."

The signora drew me towards her, gasping for breath, her eyes brimming with love and tears. She tried to speak, but seemed to be tongue-tied ; a great struggle was evidently going on within.

“ I must speak,” at length she cried. “ I cannot keep it to myself. It would kill me. Oh, my darling, my heart’s own darling ! I loved you from the moment I saw you. Now I know why. My child, my little Nellie.” She folded me in a passionate embrace, and kissed my breath away, whispering between the kisses, “ My child, my daughter, my own precious Nellie ! ”

“ You are my mother—my own real mother ? ” I cried, in a delirium of delight. “ You are my mother, and you do not hate me ! Oh, what a blessed joy ! ”

“ I am your very own mother, and I love you as child was never loved before.”

“ I have found my mother, and such a mother ! ” and I fainted away in her arms.

I soon recovered. *C'est la joie qui fait peur.* I opened my eyes to meet those of my mother gazing at me with such unutterable love that it almost frightened me.

It was now my turn to kiss her, and call her by the dearest of all names, the English name of mother. The word sounded inexpressibly sweet as it now fell from my lips for the first time. I went on repeating it slowly, softly in her ear—mother, mother, my mother! Tears of love and joy were in both our eyes, as I lay in her arms like a little child. How strange to think that I was no longer a waif, an outcast; that at last I had a mother, knew a mother's love!

Mrs. Annesley had left the room quietly, thinking that at such a moment our mutual joy was too sacred for another's eyes, and that we should be alone to give vent to the pent-up love of so many long loveless years.

I had now seen both my parents, and loved them both. I was in full possession of a mother's love, the most disinterested love on this side heaven. Should I ever know a father's?

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